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## Wicked California: Leisure and Morality during the Gold Rush, 1848-1860s

Michelle Khoury

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Play is serious. Although a paradox, it holds truth. How people behave in their spare time reflects a great deal about the society in which they live. “In our leisure,” wrote the famous poet Ovid, “we reveal what kind of people we are.” In 1938, Dutch Historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga wrote about the play element of society in *Homo Ludens*, or “Man the Player.” In this classic, he argues that civilization arises in play, integrating the notion of play into the concept of culture. Huizinga attempts to define “leisure” by detailing its essential characteristics. Play’s first quality is freedom. It is always voluntary. Second, it is outside the realm of “ordinary” or “real” life. When one plays, he or she enters a “temporary sphere of activity.” Third, play is always limited by locality and duration. It is engaged in a “playground,” such as an arena, stage, or card table, and it “plays itself to an end.” Fourth, play creates order. It involves certain rules, and one who breaks the rules typically spoils the game.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, many scholars quickly dismiss leisure’s importance in history. To demonstrate its significance, I examined miners’ recreational activities during the California Gold Rush. Many young, unmarried men fled to California in the mid-1800s to start a

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 1-12.

new life, a life of prosperity and fortune. Being away from family and other forces which impose traditional values, these miners often broke away from accepted behavior. They socialized at saloons, gambling houses, and sporting arenas. My historical question concerns the effects of these recreational activities on the character of California. Religious institutions, especially from the Northeast, sent clergymen to respond to the miners' profane behavior. I investigated the interplay between these two entities and their values: between East and West, self-discipline and freedom, and the Protestant work ethic and California's motto of "getting rich quick."

Having considered many primary sources—diaries, letters, and memoirs—I can conclude confidently that play is serious. Miners' pastimes challenged convention, driving a clash of values. Leisure is an indispensable element in understanding what scholars have dubbed California's "marketplace of morals."<sup>2</sup>

That California had a unique moral landscape during the Gold Rush era is clear. It is often described as without structure and lacking societal constraints. One observer, Hinton Helper, remarked:

I have seen purer liquors, better segars [sic], finer tobacco, truer guns and pistols, larger dirks and bowie knives, and prettier courtezans [sic] here, than in any other place I have ever visited; and it is my unbiased opinion that California can and does furnish the best bad

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<sup>2</sup> Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 5.

things that are obtainable in America.<sup>3</sup>

The moral laxity described by Helper was something unfamiliar and shocking to many who arrived in California. As demonstrated by this quote, leisure helped to create such looseness. Historian Susan Lee Johnson explains that “people in every Gold Rush community, immigrant and Indian, sought diversion from the business of producing material life—they sang and prayed, they told stories and wrote letters, they gambled and got drunk, they danced to one another’s drumming or fiddle playing and cheered at bull-and-bear fights.”<sup>4</sup> Due to the volatile and unstable nature of the gold mining industry, miners engaged in a variety of pastimes. Free from familial, cultural, and religious constraints, many broke from convention by participating in activities which would be deemed as utterly sinful in the Northeast. Johnson adds, “Leisure, defined loosely to include both diversion and sacred practices, was often a contested terrain upon which gold seekers drew boundaries that separated them into opposing camps...by different notions of what constituted appropriate behavior.”<sup>5</sup>

A controversial type of amusement was gambling, fitting and reflective of Gold Rush society. The risk, uncertainty, and high stakes of card games characterized the journey to the frontier and gold mining itself. As one historian explained, “Gambling took on a special significance in a setting like California, where

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<sup>3</sup> Hinton Helper, *Dreadful California*, ed. Lucius Beebe and Charles M. Clegg (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1948), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, 143.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

it shared with the primary economic activity, placer mining, elements of unpredictability and irrationality.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, games of chance were very popular: “Gambling was far and away the chief entertainment in the diggings.”<sup>7</sup> Some favorite card games were faro, poker, euchre, whist, and nine-pins. However, monte seems to be the most referenced in Gold Rush diaries. In an image entitled *Gambling in the Mines*, Forty-Niners are depicted playing this Mexican game of chance (See Image 1). The players at the table look pensive, as do their observers. Surrounding them is a large crowd of miners, indicating that this amusement attracted impressive numbers of men. Many miners played card games in hopes of making quick money when their efforts in the diggings were fruitless. Others played simply for recreational purposes, to divert their attention from the struggles of miner life.

Travel author Bayard Taylor described what he witnessed at a card house in the San Francisco area:

Along the end of the room is a spacious bar, supplied with all kinds of bad liquors, and in a sort of gallery...a female violinist takes her talent and strength of muscle to minister to the excitement of the day...The atmosphere of these places is rank with tobacco- smoke, and filled with a feverish, stifling heat, which communicates an unhealthy glow to the faces of the players...The dealer throws out his cards with a cool, nonchalant air; indeed, the gradual increase of the hollow square of dollars at his left

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 176.

hand is not calculated to disturb his equanimity.<sup>8</sup>

The vivid descriptions of the alcohol, violinist, tobacco smoke, and suave dealer illustrate the enticing nature of gambling halls. Card houses were a place of sensuality, community, and female company. Reverend John Steele remarked, “It must be confessed that there was such a witchery in the music, instrumental and vocal, that the masses were attracted and entranced, and in passing I found it difficult to resist the temptation to go in and listen.”<sup>9</sup> Bayard Taylor again remarked on the lure of the gaming houses, stating that American miners “have no power to resist the fascination of the game. Now counting their winnings by thousands, now dependent on the kindness of a friend for a few dollars to commence anew, they pass hour after hour in these hot, unwholesome dens.”<sup>10</sup> References to gambling halls can be found in nearly all miner diaries or letters. While in the city of Sonora, Horace Snow corresponded regularly with his friend Charlie about his adventures in California. He described one card house, called the “Long Tom,” where a French woman ran the tables. She employed five men and had already earned over forty thousand dollars from managing the “Long Tom.” The building was “fifty feet wide and two hundred feet long and all occupied as a gambling house.” Horace Snow recorded that he was not able to have a conversation with his friend there because “the din and noise

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<sup>8</sup> Bayard Taylor in H.W. Brands, *The Age of Gold* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2002), 253.

<sup>9</sup> John Steele in Maffly-Kipp, 123.

<sup>10</sup> Bayard Taylor in H.W. Brands, 253.

arising from the changing of money made it almost impossible. Such a sight in New England would shock the sensibilities of the whole land.”<sup>11</sup> These remarks illustrate how lucrative this business was. French women were closely associated with running gambling halls. They were often despised by the men because of the large sum of money they acquired from miners' earnings; the woman from Horace Snow's story certainly made enormous profits. This excerpt also reveals how rowdy and crowded the card houses were, so much so that they would “shock the sensibilities” of non-Californians.

Cards were always accompanied by liquor, and many saloons doubled as gambling halls. Both drinking and card playing were considered vices by most mid-nineteenth century Americans. An observer originally from the East Coast, Frank Soulé, commented on the saloons:

No place in the world contains any thing like the number of mere drinking-houses in proportion to the population, as San Francisco. This, perhaps, is the worst feature of the city. The quantity of ardent spirits daily consumed is almost frightful. It is peddled out in every gambling-room, on the wharves, at almost every corner, and, in some streets, in almost every house. Many of the taverns are of the lowest possible description—filthy dens of vice and crime, disease and wretchedness. Drunken men

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<sup>11</sup>Horace Snow, *“Dear Charlie” Letters: Recording the Everyday Life of a Young 1854 Gold Miner*, ed. Muriel Neavin (Fresno: Pioneer Publishing Company, 1979), 10.

and women, with bloated bodies and soiled garments, crowd them at night, making the hours hideous with their bacchanalian revels. Americans and Europeans, Mexicans and South-Americans, Chinese and even negroes, mingle and dissipate together, furnishing a large amount of business for the police department and the recorder's court.<sup>12</sup>

This passage reveals important information. For one, it illustrates the overwhelming presence of alcohol in Gold Rush California. Drinking seems to have been deeply embedded in the culture. Additionally, the passage shows that saloons were a place of commonality between people of different races. Recreational activity—particularly drinking and card playing—brought miners of all backgrounds together. As evidenced by Soulé's disapproving tone, such fraternization was unconventional at the time. Therefore, leisure had the force to produce revolutionary social conditions. Lastly, by stating that miners furnished business for the police department, Soulé seems to suggest that miners in saloons often created trouble. This comment shows that while leisure had the power to unite diverse people, it also had the power to cause violence and destruction, an issue that will be explored later more fully.

Bloody spectator sports, most famously the bull-and-bear fights, were another common amusement for miners. Johnson explains that "bull-and-bear fighting was a Mexican cultural practice, one particularly well-

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Soulé in H.W. Brands, 252.



suiting to the Sierra Nevada foothills, home to both grizzly and black bears and within distance of low-country ranchos.”<sup>13</sup> This sport was enjoyed by more than just Mexican miners. Most large mining camps had circular arenas to hold these bloody events, where spectators gasped, cheered, and shouted. Johnson adds, “Bulls were the real crowd-pleasers, enjoying as they did a special relationship to notions of manhood among Spanish-speaking peoples.”<sup>14</sup> That this was a popular amusement is not surprising. Gold Rush California consisted of an overwhelmingly male population, many of them adventurous and thrill-seeking. In an image entitled *Sport in California- A Bull and Bear Fight*, a large crowd of spectators is depicted cheering at such a contest (See Image 2). One man even seems to be seated on another’s shoulders to improve his view. The bull is illustrated romantically: his muscles are defined and his face is fearless. Historian John Boessenecker explains, “The beasts came to symbolize those traits so important to young, single men: physical strength, courage, determination, fighting skill, and above all, stubborn refusal to back down from a foe.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, this sport, originating in Mexican culture, was exotic and new for American Northeasterners, who had probably never seen such an attraction.

The unpredictable endings of these matches made for great gambling. Miners would place large bets on which animal they predicted would be the contender.

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, 180.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>15</sup> John Boessenecker, *Gold Dust and Gunsmoke: Tales of Gold Rush Outlaws, Gunfighters, Lawmen, and Vigilantes* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), 161.

The stakes and anticipation were high at these events, where thousands of spectators sat in the crowded arenas. One is reported to have seated 6,000 observers.<sup>16</sup> The brutality of the sport attracted Forty-Niner William Perkins, who described one of the most thrilling bull-and-bear fights in Sonora. He wrote that the “magnificent” bear weighed about fourteen hundred pounds. Then, the “splendid” black bull entered the arena:

His whole frame appeared to be quivering with rage; his tail was extended straight out in a line with the vertebrae, and his eyes, one could almost fancy, were flashing fire. He sprung with a single bound into the middle of the ring, and looked round profoundly and fearlessly on the crowd; then commenced a low bellowing, and tossing the dirt up with his hoofs. In a few seconds he had caught sight of his antagonist, and immediately, without the slightest hesitation, made a rush at him.<sup>17</sup>

This vivid description illustrates miners’ fascination with the excitement and brutality of this Mexican contest. They clearly admired the beasts for their strength and willingness to fight to the death. Boessenecker explains this admiration by suggesting that the bull-bear matches emulated the combat ethic of miners. “To die a glorious death in battle, whether in war or personal combat, was something honorable and even desirable. No fate was more romantic to the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>17</sup> William Perkins in Boessenecker, 162-63.

single, young American male than to die ‘with his boots on.’”<sup>18</sup> Thus, this bloody spectator sport appealed to the miners’ values of personal honor and bravery.

Similarly, Forty-Niners were attracted to bare-knuckle prizefights. Well-respected boxers, as well as the sport’s many fans, brought this tradition with them to San Francisco when they came in search of gold. Some of the most famous champions of the East Coast fought in California: Yankee Sullivan, Chris Lilly, John Morrissey, and Woolly Kearney. Prizefighting was so bloody that it was actually outlawed in most of America, but these laws were not strictly enforced in mining towns.<sup>19</sup> It “went hand in hand with the three great indulgences of the Forty-Niners: drinking, gambling, and fighting. Sectional and cultural strife were played out in the ring: American against foreigner, Englishman against Irishman, Protestant against Catholic, North against South.”<sup>20</sup> For the same reasons that miners were attracted to the violence of the bull-bear contests, they were attracted to pugilism. It embodied many Gold Rush sentiments: competition, risk, violence, and honor.

Alliances with women constituted another important form of leisure in Gold Rush California. Women, especially Anglo-American women, were rare. So miners sought any form of interaction with females. One activity through which men were able to seek female companionship was dancing. Johnson explains that dance halls “were so common that men rarely

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<sup>18</sup> Boessenecker, 167.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

bothered to describe them.”<sup>21</sup> Men and women danced to fiddle and flute. A favorite dance was the lancers quadrille, imported to America from English and Parisian ballrooms, in which four couples danced in square formation. This dance consisted of five sets of square dances, each one of the sets in a different meter. It depended on cooperative execution of floor patterns or figures, such as the *tour de deux mains* “two-hand turn,” in which the couple turned while holding hands or the *chaîne des dames* “ladies’ chain.”<sup>22</sup> The polka also was well-liked in the camps, and as with the lancers, it was accompanied by upbeat and joyous music. Edwin Bryant, Alcalde of San Francisco, recorded his experience at a Fandango in his book, *What I Saw in California*:

I attended one evening a *fandango* given by Mr. Ridley, an English gentleman, whose wife is a Californian lady. Several of the señoras and señoritas from the ranchos of the vicinity were present. The Californian ladies dance with much ease and grace. The waltz appears to be a favorite with them. Smoking is not prohibited in these assemblies, nor is it confined to the gentlemen. The *cigarita* is freely used by the señoras and señoritas, and they puff it with much gusto while threading the mazes of the cotillon or swinging in the waltz.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson, 164.

<sup>22</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “lancers,” accessed March 05, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/329055/lancers>.

<sup>23</sup> Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1848), 328-29.

This description suggests that evenings at the dance halls were lively, vivacious, and memorable. Painter Charles Nahl, known as California's first significant artist, captured this spirit in his piece, *The Fandango* (See Image 3). At the forefront, the men and women dance joyously, looking carefree. Behind them there seems to be a brawl, perhaps a result of drunkenness or jealousy over the women. For miners, the most attractive feature of this form of amusement was the opportunity it provided for female companionship.

Miners' relations with prostitutes constitute another diversion from hard work in the diggings. Often described euphemistically as "escorts," "companions," or "mistresses," they were strongly desired. This is certainly due to the scarcity of women: "In the Mother Lode in 1860 there were 2,378 men and 147 women. Prostitution was not only present, it was thriving...Prostitution was an accepted fact of California life."<sup>24</sup> Due to the demographics of the region, it was primarily non-white women who satisfied this demand. Below is a description of an encounter between miner Alfred Doten and a Miwok Indian woman. It is not entirely clear whether she was actually a prostitute, but Doten mentioned that he provided her with "presents":

This forenoon two squaws came over from the Rancheria and paid me quite a visit ? One of

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<sup>24</sup> Harland E. Hogue, *Prophets and Paupers: Religion in the California Gold Rush, 1848-1869* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1996), 85.

them was Pacheco's wife ? she had her child done up after their fashion and toted him round her back with a string over her head ? As is as usual she was accompanied by an old hag of a squaw ? I gave her several presents and made myself pretty thick with her and after a while I got her [erasure] and took her into my tent and [erasure] was about to lay her altogether but the damned old bitch of a squaw came in as mad as a hatter and gave the young gal a devil of a blowing up ? Nevertheless I still left my hand in her bosom and kissed her again right before the old woman. She didn't get cross at all but gave me a slap in the face and ran away laughing. . . I told the little gal in Spanish to come up alone sometime and as she understood Spanish she said she would if she could ever get a chance.<sup>25</sup>

The racial dimension of this encounter is impossible to ignore. Clearly, the social norms for Miwok Indians contrasted starkly with those of Anglo-Americans, who would have been horrified at the thought of a married woman—with a child—having relations with another man.

Although leisurely activities were intended to be entertaining and fun, they often led to violence. Regarding gambling—jealousies over large winnings, fear of cheating, and alcohol consumption while playing—frequently fostered ill will. Historian Johnson claims that, “Indeed, no other activity in the diggings,

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<sup>25</sup>Alfred Doten, *The Journals of Alfred Doten 1849-1903*, ed. Walter Van Tilburg Clark (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1973), 125-26.

aside from mining itself, provoked as much rancor as gambling.”<sup>26</sup> Describing his experience at a San Francisco gaming house, Bayard Taylor observed: “There is no appearance of arms, but let one of the players, impatient with his losses and maddened by the poisonous fluids he drank, threaten one of the profession, and there will be no scarcity of knives and revolvers.”<sup>27</sup> Tales of Gold Rush violence are countless, and—significantly—many of these brawls started within the context of leisure.

Leisure’s dialectical relationship with morality is apparent in examining Sabbath day observance. Miners commonly broke the day of rest by attending bull-and-bear fights, visiting game houses, and dancing at fandango halls. Sunday, proclaimed miner and journalist Alfred Doten, “has ever been the grand holiday throughout California.”<sup>28</sup> He described the typical miner’s holy day: he washed his boots and clothes and went to town to purchase various necessities. He may have decided to visit a saloon while in town, and “might be seen having a most unhappy time lugging his provisions home over the rocks and across the ravines” while intoxicated.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, if he enjoyed cards, he visited a card house. Hinton Helper’s experience in the Golden State led him to conclude that “the Sabbath in California is kept, when kept at all, as a day of hilarity and bacchanalian sports rather than as a season of holy meditation or religious devotion.”<sup>30</sup> Attending various spectator sports, watching

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson, 177.

<sup>27</sup> Bayard Taylor in H.W. Brands, 253-4.

<sup>28</sup> Doten, 326.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>30</sup> Helper, 86.

theatrical performances, dancing, and gambling seemed to be the most popular Sunday pastimes. On Pacific Street in San Francisco, the most “notoriously profligate” street in the city, there were a shocking fifteen dance houses. Although this “terpsichorean art” was practiced every evening, it was Sundays when attendees danced with the most “zest” and “animation.”<sup>31</sup> Helper described a San Francisco billiard-saloon on Washington and Montgomery streets, noting its magnificence in size and décor. He claimed that it was furnished at an astounding cost of twenty-five thousand dollars: “To this place hundreds of infatuated men betake themselves every Sunday and it is an unusual thing, at any time, to find one of the tables unoccupied.”<sup>32</sup> Miner Horace Snow, in a letter to a companion, distinguished Sabbath day observance between the Northern and Southern people, in which he accused Southerners of making “but little difference” on Sundays. Being from Bridgewater, Massachusetts, and strictly upholding his Christian roots, he disapproved of the nonconventional lifestyle of his fellow miners, remarking that there was “more intoxication, more fighting and more disturbance on the Sabbath than any other day in the week.”<sup>33</sup> These Gold Rush observers all suggest that the holy day did not merely go unobserved, but rather, it was a day of sin and wickedness. In short, conscious transgression of Eastern custom characterized California social life.

Louise Clappe, under the name of Dame Shirley, made similar observations about leisure’s negative

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>33</sup> Snow, 13.



impact on the holy day. The wife of Dr. Fayette Clappe, Dame Shirley lived with her husband in mining camps for fifteen months. In a September 1851 letter to her sister, she described how one amusement was especially popular on the day of rest: “The rolling on the bowling alley never leaves off for ten consecutive minutes at any time during the entire twenty-four hours...the only difference that Sunday makes is that then it never leaves off for *one* minute.”<sup>34</sup> Not only were sporting events, drinking, and dancing present on the day of rest, but so was violence—which was often provoked by such pastimes. Dame Shirley wrote, sarcastically:

We have had innumerable drunken fights during the summer, with the usual amount of broken heads, collar bones, stabs, etc. Indeed, the Sabbaths are almost always enlivened by some such merry event. Were it not for these affairs, I might sometimes forget that the sweet day of rest was shining down upon us.<sup>35</sup>

This comment reflects how commonplace violence and disorder were on Sundays—Dame Shirley and her contemporaries even expected such “merry events.”

To fully understand why these Sunday amusements were so unique to California, it is necessary to contrast them to how the holy day was spent in the rest of America, especially in New England. Sundays

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<sup>34</sup> Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe, *The Shirley Letters: From the California Mines, 1851-1852*, ed. Marlene Smith-Baranzini (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1998), 40-41.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

were devoutly observed. Businesses were closed and recreation was forbidden. Very few travelled. Rather, they stayed at home or with nearby friends and relatives after services. The pious spent the day in prayer, rest, and reflection on the sermon. Sabbath observance was so important in the rest of the country that all the states east of the Mississippi had Sunday observance laws which prohibited businesses from being open on the day of rest.<sup>36</sup> These policies were strictly enforced in the 1850s, except in the most metropolitan of towns. Historian Sandra Frankiel explains that Sunday laws were, from the Anglo-Protestant perspective, “essential not only to religion but to civilization itself. Without it, men would...make their day of rest a day for...wild behavior.”<sup>37</sup>

Puritan customs were completely foreign to California. The state’s Christian history was rooted in Catholicism. Roman Catholic missionaries certainly conducted Sunday mass, but they did not forbid the territory’s Spanish and Mexican traditions of dancing and feasting after liturgy. Following the discovery of gold, this leniency—as the Protestants would describe it—became even more prevalent. Mining camps lacked stability, family, women, and many societal structures. Without such restraints, Sunday activities encompassed more than the traditional Mexican celebrations, they grew to include amusements of the most sinful nature. “From almost the moment they arrived, minis-

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<sup>36</sup> Sandra Sizer Frankiel, *California’s Spiritual Frontiers: Religious Alternatives in Anglo-Protestantism, 1850-1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 47.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

ters began calling for a statewide Sunday law.”<sup>38</sup> In 1855, state lawmakers passed, after much debate, a prohibition on noisy and disturbing activities on Sunday. Three years later, another statute was passed which forbade businesses from operating on the Sabbath. However, businessmen, miners, non-Christians, and Seventh-Day Adventists immediately challenged these provisions. The church could not effectively impose New England ideals in wicked California.<sup>39</sup>

Church efforts were numerous, the most significant of which was the Protestant church’s American Home Mission Society (AHMS), which sponsored missionaries to travel west. The general objective was to reverse the state’s moral laxity by imposing order and stability. To achieve this goal, the organization built churches, encouraged Sunday attendance at services, converted the dissolute, and founded societies that would perpetuate their message. Religious historian Laurie Maffly-Kipp explains that nearly all Presbyterian and Congregationalist ministers in California were commissioned by the home mission agency. Other religious representatives though, such as the Methodists and Baptists, came to California independently.<sup>40</sup>

Another way in which religious institutions responded to the California problem was by founding schools— which were intended to stabilize society, return to tradition, and spread the Christian message. Many schools, from elementary to college level, were

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>40</sup> Maffly-Kipp, 71.

established in the 1850's and 1860's. For example, the College of California, now the University of California at Berkeley, was founded by Congregationalists. In 1851, two Italian Jesuits, Fathers Nobili and Acolti, founded the first institution of higher education: Santa Clara University. What is now St. Mary's College of Moraga was another Catholic school, originally in Oakland. Methodist Reverend and Mrs. Edward Bannister founded the College of the Pacific, later the University of the Pacific, which was originally in San Jose. These schools' rigid guidelines demonstrate the impact caused by the perceived threat of Gold Rush leisure. For example, University of the Pacific prohibited "profane language, use of ardent spirits, gambling or card playing, frequenting drinking saloons...Dancing was not to be thought of."<sup>41</sup> That these activities were forbidden according to university policy demonstrates the unmistakable prevalence and seriousness of Gold Rush leisure.

On a smaller scale, Christian women attempted to improve California's character by forming their own small classrooms. Sarah Royce is a prime example. She instructed the neighbors' children, as well as her own, in her humble mining camp home. Passionate and active in civic and religious duty, she taught her students math, geography, literature, and the Christian tenets. Her efforts to uplift society went beyond the classroom. In a memoir written for her son, her deep religious convictions and unflinching effort to bring civilization to an unruly society are apparent in other ways. She joined religious groups and women's clubs. An excerpt from her account details an experience at

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<sup>41</sup> Hogue, 133.

a San Francisco Benevolent Society event:

There entered the room a man, prominent for wealth and business-power, bearing upon his arm a splendidly dressed woman, well known in the city as the disreputable companion of her wealthy escort... in a few minutes he was waited upon by a committee of gentlemen, who called him aside, and told him they were sent, by the lady-managers to say that they declined to receive as an associate, or to have introduced to their daughters, one who stood in the relation occupied by his companion, and they respectfully requested him to invite her to withdraw with him.<sup>42</sup>

This anecdote exemplifies an effort by the religious community, specifically Christian women, to counter the sinful pastimes of miners. They did so by organizing events which barred profane and distasteful behavior. Sarah Royce and her contemporaries, who were members of these kinds of religious organizations, provided alternate, regulated amusements.

Although religious institutions responded to leisure and the moral crisis it perpetuated, their efforts fell short of their high expectations. The goal was essentially to plant the Puritan faith in the frontier, yet California proved to be an environment incapable of such a substantial transformation. Religious historian Frankiel explains that Anglo-Protestant theology

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<sup>42</sup> Sarah Royce, *A Frontier Lady: Recollections of the Gold Rush and Early California*, ed. Ralph Henry Gabriel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 114.

presumed social elements which did not exist in the Golden State: “If a minister was conservative, he preached a strongly orthodox doctrine of sin and guilt...this theology was based on a legal model—a sinner was guilty like a criminal...But Californians had no commonly accepted obligations.”<sup>43</sup> There were no enforced and fixed laws; the state was newly acquired by the United States, and so it was not yet regulated under federal law. Also, moral obligations that were universally held in the East were in no way universal on the frontier, where preexisting Catholic norms provided few recognizable controls to self-indulgence for Protestants. Frankiel adds, “On the other hand, a more liberal minister might de-emphasize guilt and damnation, preaching instead the love of God in Christ. [Ministers] would liken Jesus to an intimate friend or loving parent.”<sup>44</sup> This theological approach, like the conservative one, was not suitable to California’s social atmosphere. The liberal model presumed the social element of the ideal family, but the state consisted of thousands of independent and single men.

The endeavor to replicate the moral environment of the Northeast in California was unsuccessful, and several religious representatives revealed their disappointment. Methodist preacher William Taylor remarked that the Golden State was “the hardest country in the world in which to get sinners converted to God.”<sup>45</sup> Baptist minister O.C. Wheeler complained about the difficulty to “get a man to look through a

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<sup>43</sup> Frankiel, 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>45</sup> William Taylor in Frankiel, 8.

lump of gold into eternity.”<sup>46</sup> Churchmen often felt ineffective. Although they reported impressive Sunday mass attendance, they were disappointed with the lack of religious fervor and involvement in church activities. The competition with secular entertainment inhibited a spirit of religious devotion.<sup>47</sup>

It was simply too difficult to escape sin in California. Even where churches, ministers, and sources of tradition did exist, they were never far from Californian indulgences. The close proximity between virtue and vice is documented by numerous Gold Rush contemporaries. Horace Snow, for example, recorded that he attended a church gathering in a bar room due to the scarcity of places of worship: “Verily,” he wrote, “this seemed like bearding the lion in his den.”<sup>48</sup> Historian Maffly-Kipp explains that due to a lack of resources, the first missionaries had to hold services in the streets or in rented rooms above gambling houses, dance halls, and even brothels. She explains that—even after the Protestants were able to build churches—their efforts to replicate the moral atmosphere of the east were unsuccessful. “California churches, albeit edifices hewn from New England pine, designed by eastern architects, and constructed by evangelical hands, were distinctive by virtue of their placement alongside western gambling parlors and dance halls and their occupation by young male miners.”<sup>49</sup> The sacred could not avoid the profane. There were many other contradictions in the state’s

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<sup>46</sup> O.C. Wheeler in Frankiel, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Maffly-Kipp, 88-90.

<sup>48</sup> Snow, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Maffly-Kipp, 84.

moral atmosphere: a Catholic priest who used liquor bottles to hold altar candles, a Protestant minister who substituted a brandy cask for a pulpit, or a fandango dancer who would attend church after a rousing evening.<sup>50</sup>

These inconsistencies reflect a unique and ambivalent Californian moral character. Hinton Helper documented experiences which truly puzzled him. On a Sunday afternoon, he attended a contest where the bull, "Hercules," would meet his match with a bear, "Trojan," in a San Francisco arena. Helper was tempted to witness the drama, but was conflicted about witnessing such a violent amusement on the Sabbath. To compromise, he decided to hear a sermon first and attend the event afterwards. Below is an excerpt from his records, which reveals a remarkable paradox of that Sunday:

Of men, [in the crowds] there were all sizes, colors and classes, such as California and California alone can bring together. There was one, however, who attracted my particular attention on this occasion. He sat a few feet from me on my left and the expression of his countenance was neither intellectual nor amiable. His acquirements and attainments were doubtless limited for he demeaned himself rudely and exhibited but little dignity of manner. It was a strange metamorphosis he had undergone since the morning. Only four hours had elapsed since I saw him officiating at the

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<sup>50</sup> Johnson, 151-154.



altar and feasting upon a substance which he believed to be the actual flesh and blood of Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup>

Recognizing the man from Sunday mass at the bull-bear fight just hours later, Helper seemed confused and revolted. He continued the passage by describing how holy the man seemed that morning, dressed in vestments and assuming sacred duties. Later that same day, he “sanctioned merciless diversions,” carried himself in the most rude and disagreeable manner, and “mingled on terms of equality with gamblers and desperados.”<sup>52</sup> For Helper and many of his contemporaries, California was a society that seemed indifferent to religion. This sentiment was illustrated not just by rowdy and reckless miners, but also by religious representatives. Of course, this minister’s contradictory actions do not accurately reflect the behaviors of Gold Rush clergymen in general. In fact, the church’s stance on these bloody spectator sports was unambiguous; it rallied against them and pushed for legislation to have such brutality banned. Nonetheless, Helper’s encounter with this minister solidified his opinion of the Golden State: morally depraved, chaotic, unstable, and—as demonstrated by the title of his work—dreadful.

The same day at the bull-bear match, Helper noted another irony. This story, however, reveals sarcasm rather than genuine repugnance. When Jesús Alvarez—one of the managers of the afternoon’s entertainment—was before the crowd of spectators,

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<sup>51</sup> Helper, 97.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

Helper experienced the following reaction to the manager's name: "The...name sounded strangely in my ears. It occurred to me that it was peculiarly out of place in its present connection. What! Jesus at a bullfight on Sunday, and not only at it, but one of the prime movers and abettors in it!"<sup>53</sup> Although facetious, Helper's remarks reflect his overall sentiments about the Californian religious and cultural character. His comments, along with those of other Gold Rush participants and historians who I discussed above, demonstrate the incongruities of the state's moral landscape.

Secular entertainment undoubtedly posed challenges to the religious community and its efforts. Gold Rush leisure was serious. It challenged codes of normalcy and shaped a peculiar moral character. In California, freedom and fun prevailed over self-control, pursuit of wealth triumphed over frugality, and violence outweighed peace. Californian values collided with those of the rest of the nation, and it was popular pastimes which helped drive this clash.

In discussing the moral atmosphere of Gold Rush California, there are certainly other components which deserve mention. Gender and race are social elements which undoubtedly helped to shape notions of morality in the Golden State. With respect to gender, the scarcity of women facilitated miners' departure from conventional behavior. The absence of women and the family unit—civilizing social forces no doubt—helped to make California a volatile society. Without mothers and wives monitoring and regulating male activity,

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

masculine impulses were uninhibited. The youth of the majority of these miners further explains their behavior. No longer restrained by the Protestant Northeast's conventions, these men tasted freedom for the first time in a fascinating land where there were no rules.

Race and ethnicity, undoubtedly, also complicated the character of California. Immigrant New Englanders worked and played alongside other immigrants of even wider backgrounds: Chinese, Mexican, Chilean, French, and Australian. They also interacted with California's indigenous population. Miners brought with them the customs of their own particular cultures, producing a confused definition of acceptable behavior.

Furthermore, California—admitted to the United States in 1850—was not effectively regulated by the Federal Government. Since it was a new addition and because it was located so far away from the country's capital, violent and often illegal activity went unnoticed. The absence of governmentally-regulated law and order during the state's infancy can be explained also by historical context. The Gold Rush years coincided with a heated national debate about slavery. California's chaotic situation was not on the Federal Government's agenda during the critical years leading up to the Civil War.

The gender and racial makeup, along with the nation's preoccupation during the antebellum era, are noteworthy factors which I was unable to thoroughly explore in this paper. These elements, along with miners' leisurely activities, created California's unique moral laxity during the mid-nineteenth century.

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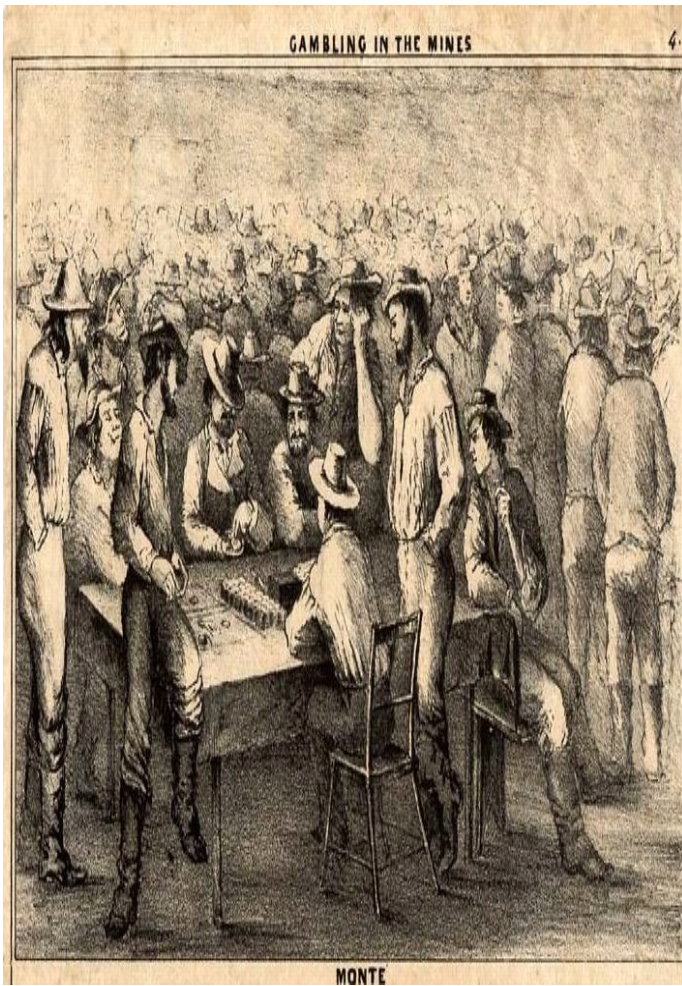


Image 1

Unidentified Artist, Gambling in the Mines, Bancroft Library, Berkeley. <http://bancroft.library.ca.gov/diglib/imagedata.cfm?id=888>.

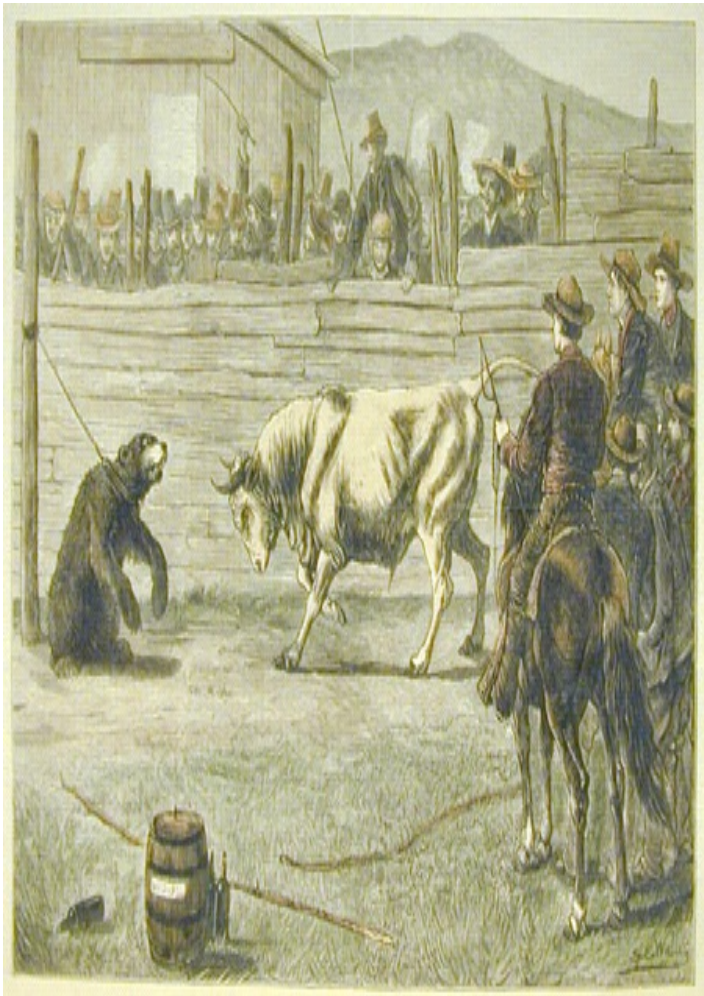


Image 2

Unidentified Artist, *Sport in California- A Bull and Bear Fight*, 1873,  
Lyons Limited Antique Prints,  
[http://www.lyonsltd.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/Main.PrintView/printID/  
1393.cfm?printReturnTo=Main.SubjectView%26SubjectID%3D24](http://www.lyonsltd.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/Main.PrintView/printID/1393.cfm?printReturnTo=Main.SubjectView%26SubjectID%3D24)

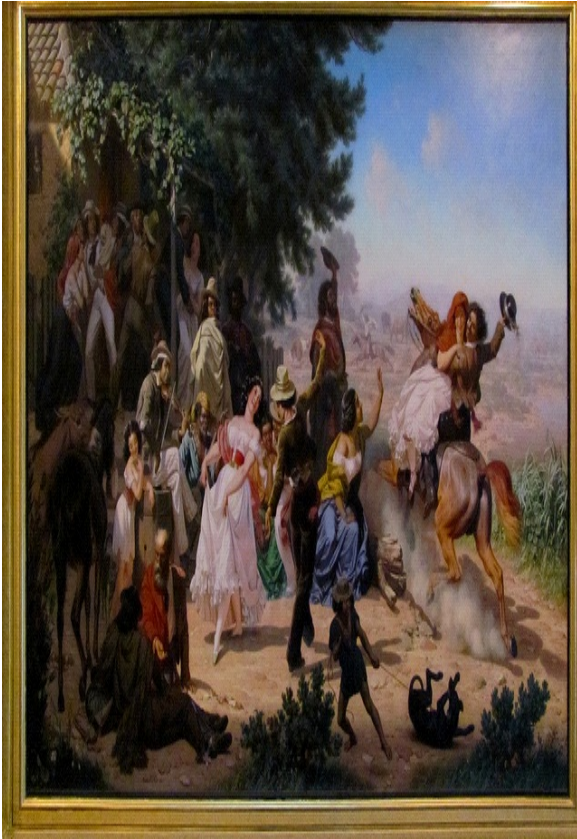


Image 3

Charles Nahl, *The Fandango*, 1873, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento