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“One Only Hope Sustains All These Unhappy Pilgrims”— Migrant Adaptation of the Myth of California in the Gold Rush and Dust Bowl

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For centuries, California has captivated the imaginations of dreamers throughout the world. Early maps portrayed California as a “mythical island;” maps characterized by historian James Houston as some of the most accurate maps available: “geographically wrong, but psychologically close to the truth.” The fascination with California continues to this day. Whether it be the bustling and illustrious film industry of Los Angeles and Hollywood, the eclectic and historically rich world of San Francisco, or the fast-paced roulette game that is the Silicon Valley, California continues to be a place for dreams to run wild—a place that provides newcomers with hope for a magical future. According to journalist Joel Kotkin, “It has always been a place of unsurpassed splendor; it has inspired and attracted writers, artists, dreamers, savants, and philosophers.” Though the reality is unable to live up to the myth, California remains a staple in the American and international imagination. Ramón Gil Navarro, a Gold Rush hopeful from Chile, perhaps described the mystery of this lasting allure best: “But this is California, the land of odd events, things never heard of before, land of changes, land made up of strange things, magical land, a land capable of producing another Don Quixote to conquer all of its gold.” Though the myth’s intricacies have varied throughout the years, an aura of sheer magic persists.

Scores of historians have written about California, especially on the Gold Rush and Dust Bowl eras, with many placing special emphasis on the fantastic stories and legends these periods produced. Though they have received such a great deal of attention—both popular and scholarly—there has not been much work done on the California myth itself, especially in terms of why and how it persisted despite the constant failures that hopeful newcomers experienced. Historians have failed to ask why migrants continued to come to California, why they stayed when they realized that the myths were not true, and how they dealt with the tragic loss of the California dreams they held so dearly. The answer to these questions can only be found in the first-hand accounts of the migrants who came to

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3 Houston, “From El Dorado,” 173.
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Though the reality is unable to live up to the myth, California remains a staple in the American and international imagination. Ramón Gil Navarro, a Gold Rush hopeful from Chile, perhaps described the mystery of this lasting allure best: "But this is California, the land of odd events, things never heard of before, land of changes, land made up of strange things, magical land, a land capable of producing another Don Quixote to conquer all of its gold.” Though the myth’s intricacies have varied throughout the years, an aura of sheer magic persists.

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California. California’s inability to live up to the myth’s remarkable claims forced newcomers to find various means of coping with such an immense loss. For migrants during both the Gold Rush and the Dust Bowl, the only way to survive and find happiness was to adapt one’s expectations and understanding of the myth to better fit the reality.

When James Marshall pulled a gold nugget from the water at Sutter’s Mill on the morning of January 24, 1848, he unknowingly started one of the most famous gold rushes in modern history. By the summer of 1848, scores of hopefuls arrived in California, ready to try their luck and seek fortune in the local waters, with nearly 5,000 newcomers in California by the end of 1848. Within a year of the discovery, California’s population had increased eightfold, a shift that drastically changed its economy, infrastructure, and culture. The thousands who rushed in came with great expectations for California: expectations of “gold nuggets lying about the countryside and available to all.” Some accounts described “streams paved with gold,” prompting some hopefuls to believe that El Dorado had finally been discovered, while others claimed that a miner could easily dig out $700 each day with little effort or skill. Gold fever spread across the nation like wildfire, bolstered by a flood of advertisements proclaiming California’s wealth and majesty.

Songs from the period sing earnest praises: “Hurray for California! the [sic] greatest place in all creation, / Where gold is dug as ‘taters are in this ‘ere Yankee nation / . . . O! Won’t it be a glorious time when gold runs down like water, / And nobody won’t have to work, and nobody had oughter [sic].” Miners came primed and ready to enjoy the glories of California.

Illustrations helped feed the fever, providing exaggerated depictions of all California had to offer. In one 1850s French publication, Travail en Californie, a surprised miner excitedly revels in his newly-found—and rather sizable—gold nugget lying mere inches beneath the soil. Behind him, the illustration features palm trees, clear streams, and a snowcapped mountain. Another illustration, California Gold, shows a successful miner sitting on his enormous gold nugget while a massive sperm whale pulls him around the Cape Horn on his way home to New York. The caption reads, “An accurate drawing of the famous hill of gold.” Other illustrations portrayed the mining life as an enjoyable and easy one, as in The Idle and Industrious Miner. This illustration depicts mining as a sure path to success if the miner is only adamant in his efforts and does not fall victim to sloth, a conception that further fueled the myth. In addition to these fantastical visual depictions, Gold Rush newcomers were also influenced heavily by the body of travel literature published during the time, with titles such as What I Saw in California, Three Weeks in the Gold Mines, or Lansford Hastings’s infamous The Emi-

7 Ibid., 10.
8 Ibid., 15.
9 Ibid., 19.
10 Ibid., 19.
11 Ibid., 23-24, 27.
12 Peter Browning, ed., To the Golden Shore (Lafayette: Great West Books, 1995), 164.
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\(^11\) Ibid., 23-24, 27.
\(^12\) Peter Browning, ed., *To the Golden Shore* (Lafayette: Great West Books, 1995), 164.
grants’ Guide to Oregon and California.¹³ These publications advertised a California nearly identical to that which the aforementioned illustrations portrayed and provided migrants with advice that gave them an added sense of confidence, only adding to the passion with which they entered California. The belief that hard work was the key to a miner’s success also played into the migrants’ sense of confidence, as it allowed them to dismiss any evidence that contradicted the myth as being related to the particular miner’s work ethic or drive. With this confidence, along with the extraordinary tales and images that the myth provided, newcomers came to California ready for nothing more than disappointment.

The fantastic stories coming from California quickly developed into an extravagant myth. Though some aspects of the myth originated in actual Gold Rush experiences—like that of Antonio Francisco Coronel who pulled over $2,000 worth of gold from the river in his first three days—much of the exaggeration likely stems from the amount of hope miners invested in the myth of California.¹⁴ The majority of the migrants came to California not under duress, but rather out of an intense lust for gold, fortune, and success. The myth was shaped around a single focal point—the gold to be found—rather than a vague promise of prosperity. Because these miners were hoping for riches rather than just an improved situation, the myth grew to epic and unrealistic proportions. Though many Americans questioned the validity of the extraordinary claims about California, the myth was able to maintain its strength due to the wealth that continued to pour out of California for some and the overwhelming lust that the myth—regardless of its validity—inspired in hopefuls.¹⁵

Even after the Gold Rush flood slowed, the stream of newcomers to California continued. At the turn of the century—starting in about 1910—thousands of migrants began pouring into California, especially out of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Many historians attribute this migration to the effects of agricultural mechanization, which left many Midwestern farmers out of work. Similarly, after World War I, prices for crops dropped drastically, pushing more farmers to California in search of job opportunities in a growing economy.¹⁶ The migration continued steadily until the 1930s, with the population of California doubling every 20 years.¹⁷ When the Great Depression struck in the 1930s, a new wave of about 300,000-400,000 new migrants rushed to California seeking job opportunities in the land of plenty.¹⁸ Devastated by both the economic downturn as well as the horrible drought—known as the Dust Bowl—that destroyed the Mid-West’s agricultural hopes, these migrants came from both rural and urban backgrounds in desperation, seeking work wherever they could find it.¹⁹ Just

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13 Blodgett, Land of Golden Dreams, 36.
15 Peter J. Blodgett, Land of Golden Dreams (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1999), 30.
17 Gregory, American Exodus, 8.
18 Ibid., 10.
19 Ibid., 11, 15.
as Gold Rush migrants expected an easier life in California, the migrants who arrived during the Dust Bowl came with hopes for an improved climate and a more robust job market. Songs about California praised it as a “poor man’s heaven” or a place where money grew on trees, with other songs promising an abundance of jobs: “They say, ‘Come on, you Okies, / Work is easy found / Bring along your cotton pack / You can pick the whole year round.’” Much like the Gold Rush migrants, the newcomers to California during the Dust Bowl arrived with high hopes, only to have them dashed by reality.

During the Dust Bowl, visual advertisements created during the 1920s played, arguably, an even larger role in newcomers’ understanding of California than they did during the Gold Rush. Romantic scenes of California—many featuring lush and green pastures—had been spread across the country, adding to the hopes that newcomers had for California and building upon the existing myth. In one advertisement from 1925, the illustrator depicts Orange County as “Nature’s Prolific Wonderland,” complete not only with an ocean view, but also with fertile pastures as far as the eye can see [Appendix, Figure 4]. Other illustrations focus on California’s opportunities for job seekers. Two 1923 advertisements for Ventura County depict happy workers bringing their produce from the fields; behind them is a beautiful valley full of ripe fields ready for picking, with the caption: “Opportunity in California” [Appendix, Figure 5]. Others focus on California as a place for “settlers,” perhaps appealing to the American pioneer mentality. Two separate Southern Pacific illustrations from 1922 advertise “California for the Settler,” depicting a beautiful land of opportunity and happiness. In the first, a man holds his smiling daughter in a field with cows grazing in the background [Appendix, Figure 6]. The scene suggests that California offers every man the opportunity to raise a family comfortably while enjoying the bounties of the earth. In the second, ripe oranges, cows, thick pastures, and a small body of water in the background reinforce the notion of California as a lush paradise [Appendix, Figure 7].

These illustrations played a major role in the Dust Bowl migrants’ understanding of California. Claims of success that came back from migrants who left the Midwest for California in the 1920s—like those that Thomas Smith describes—provided an added sense of hope for the migrants, reassuring them that even if California was not as fantastic as the illustrations and advertisements had depicted it, it would still be a vast improvement from their situation and would provide them with the opportunities they dreamt of. Though the illustrations depict a mythical place of bounty, they do not present a specific promise—a factor that played an immense role in the Dust Bowl migrant’s ability to adapt the myth and survive in California. The myth did promise jobs, but beyond that the promises remained vague and unbinding, allowing the migrants to adapt their understanding with relative ease.

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20 Ibid., 19-20.

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in the lives of the migrants during these time periods, dealing with the fact that the reality did not match up was a challenging endeavor. One of the first difficulties for migrants was the challenge to let go of the extreme stories from which the myth was based. Gold Rush emigrant Margaret Frink recalls one travelling companion, Mr. Avery, who struggled to let go of the myth. Frustrated with the pace of their wagon train, Avery decided to remove himself from the group and complete the rest of the journey on foot. Frink describes his determination with a sense of awe, saying: “We gave him all the provisions he could carry, and he started, with blankets, clothing, and provisions strapped on his back, to walk fifteen hundred miles to California.”

Frink’s husband notes at the end of the account that Avery’s faith in California ultimately failed him—he headed home only a month after his arrival, wasting an enormous sum of money, months of travel, and, likely, a well-established life back home. Avery’s tale of disappointment and loss certainly pales in comparison to the plight of other migrants who—willingly or not—stayed in California. During the Dust Bowl, one man, suffering from sciatic rheumatism and acute bronchitis, was told by his doctor to move to California to improve his health. Upon arriving, he was forced to live in a tent in a camp for migrant workers, and his health suffered more than it had in Indiana.

For many others, the dream of California ended in death, a point overland pioneer Bernard J. Reid laments in a letter back home to his family. Describing California as a “far-famed land,” Reid angrily recalls the difficulties of the journey, attributing these tragedies to the myth itself: “When I now look back upon it, it appears like a long, dreadful dream . . . we were all grievously deceived (unintentionally perhaps), by the press and the leading merchants of St. Louis. It proved an infamous imposter . . . criminals of the deepest die, — for the deaths of several men and the tears of widows and orphans are the consequences of their bad faith, cupidity, and inhumanity.” They came expecting to find the Promised Land, and instead found poverty, discrimination, hardship, and, sometimes, death.

Though somewhat theatrical, Reid’s anger was certainly warranted. Countless California hopefuls arrived only to find that the promises were lies and exaggerations, and dealing with this realization proved extremely difficult. Many migrants reacted immediately with anger—at the myth, at the people who propagated it, and at the state itself. For Ramón Gil Navarro, California was far from the land of his dreams. Migrating from Chile during the Gold Rush, Navarro anticipated making a great fortune in the gold fields and mines; however, his hopes were quickly dashed and he reacted rather aggressively towards California, describing it as the land of the damned and the place where hopes and dreams die: “Ay! How many have waited just like us for six months and have finally seen the illusion of it all, as when a man condemned to death

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23 Notes, Charles L. Todd, August 6, 1940, box 3, folder 1, Dust Bowl Migration Archive, 1938-1981, North Bay Regional and Special Collections, Sonoma State University.
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Similarly, Navarro characterizes California as a land where “there are no pleasures” and a land in which every man is filled with lament: “It is impossible to portray the way these men suffered physically and morally and how they regretted having abandoned their families to come in search of a fortune that every day seems further and further away.”

Although Navarro’s situation was especially difficult as a foreigner, he attributes nearly all of his challenges to the myth, alleging that it set him and his fellow immigrants up for failure and greatly added to their woes. His resentment against California—as a place and as an idea—is very strong, and he argues that it is the same for all California hopefuls: “The ones arriving are filled with laughs, hopes, and their eyes seem to be envisioning a future filled with fortune. Among those leaving you can see the bitterness of frustrated hope and the negative effects of a backbreaking job they were not used to, a job that can humble the toughest of men. Their faces all reflect the privations and even miseries they have had while here.”

For Navarro, anything short of the myth was both a disappointment and, seemingly, a personal attack. Though Navarro’s situation warrants frustration, his anger is greatly exacerbated by the myth. Because Navarro came to California willingly to chase dreams of a fortune in gold, he was not emotionally prepared for any failures.

Navarro, along with other Gold Rush migrants who reacted with anger, placed his faith in California as a place where he would find gold and make his fortune—a very specific dream that made adaptation difficult.

Much like Navarro, many Dust Bowl migrants were extremely disappointed in the discrepancy between real California and mythical California. Though the entire nation was struggling with both the Depression and the environmental devastation of the Dust Bowl, California had been portrayed as a place that was exempt from the suffering. Although California did have job opportunities as promised, many migrants resented the treatment they received and the lies they were told. This anger prompted them to react aggressively, as Navarro had. One migrant, identified only as “Votaw,” sarcastically exclaimed to interviewers: “California has two good crops each year: suckers and lemons. Both should be picked green.”

In much the same spirit, an anonymous migrant told interviewers of how the myth had failed him: “They told us this was the land of milk and honey; but I guess the cow went dry and the tumblebugs got in the beehive!”

Though these migrants expressed their anger with humor, others were not so light-hearted. A migrant known as “Oklahoma Pete” angrily denounces the lies the myth propagated, saying: “Always heard at [sic] a feller didn’t need no coat in Californy [sic]. Betcha the feller what [sic] started at [sic] didn’t ever get up bout [sic] sun-up

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25 Navarro, Gold Rush Diary, 28.
26 Ibid., 35.
27 Ibid., 54.
28 Ibid., 22.
29 Letter selections, Assorted, box 3, folder 3, Dust Bowl Migration Archive, 1938-1981, North Bay Regional and Special Collections, Sonoma State University.
30 Ibid.
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to pick peas.” This anger not only speaks to the difficulties of migrant life but also to the sheer strength of their belief in the myth. Had these migrants not come expecting to find the jobs that the myth promised, their anger would have been significantly tempered.

Though most migrants began their California experience with anger and resentment, many found ways to adapt their understanding of the myth in order to survive in California. For some, giving up the specific promises of the myth proved to be too difficult, and these migrants oftentimes were unable to survive in California. For others—the migrants who were able to succeed and remain in California—adaptation proved to be the key to success. Though the way migrants understood California changed, it is evident in numerous accounts that the myth remained a major part of each migrant’s life, even if it had evolved to better match the reality.

Adapting to a new myth was a much more difficult task for Gold Rush migrants than for those of the Dust Bowl. Because California was still a relatively new area of American settlement for the former, the myths and stories about it still held the potential of validity, a potential that made it extremely difficult because so many came by choice rather than out of desperation. This difficulty is especially apparent in Bernard J. Reid’s account. Though Reid was extremely vocal about his anger towards California and the myth, his narrative evidences a lasting connection to the myth and a lingering hope that it could still prove to be true for him. Although Reid claims that the allure of California exists chiefly in the fact that it is a vast improvement over the difficult journey that migrants endure to reach it, he still refers to California as “the land of promise” upon first seeing it.

Additionally, when Reid finally arrives at the gold fields, he eagerly rushes to the riverbank to pan “just for an experiment” with a sense of excitement that is reminiscent of the excitement he felt as he took gold panning lessons before he began his journey. Though Reid describes the fields as “lonesome” and challenging, he nonetheless is unable to fully denounce California, demonstrating that the myth lingers deep within: “Am not discouraged yet, but find it very hard work for a little filthy lucre.” Reid’s description certainly cannot be considered a glowing review of California; however, his desire to test the validity of the myth suggests a deep and unrelenting connection to it. Even if Reid’s brief bout of gold panning served no purpose beyond material for a letter home—a souvenir of sorts to show his family and friends—it still demonstrates a willingness and desire to adapt the myth to his reality.

Ramón Gil Navarro also found it extremely chal-

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31 Ibid.
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Ramón Gil Navarro also found it extremely chal-
Navarro, like Reid, harbored a great deal of anger and resentment towards the myth due to the difficulties that he suffered throughout his time in California. Despite his anger, Navarro is incapable of losing hope in California—adapting the myth little by little to maintain faith when his previous hopes did not come to fruition. Navarro quickly adjusts to his new home and reevaluates his understanding of it relatively early on in his narrative, saying, “. . . there is nobody who is really miserable yet.” Navarro reveals his evolved understanding of California much more explicitly later in the narrative, describing California as a land “where freedom reigns supreme in every way,” as well as a place of prosperity: “They say all of North American [sic] is going to empty out into California and that it has become a symbol of the land of prosperity for all those who pray that prosperity will be theirs someday.” As Navarro becomes less focused on the specifics of the myth of California, he is much happier and is finally able to enjoy the benefits and beauties of its reality.

Navarro’s adapted understanding of the myth of California only grows as he spends more time in the state. After a year in California, Navarro’s opinion of the state nearly returns to original mythical proportions, and he describes how he has great faith in his own ability to succeed and prosper in California. Though Navarro continues to face various hardships—including lost property, financial challenges, and romantic failures—he still finds hope and joy in the smallest pleasures of California: “My God, these moments of intense pleasure beyond imagination are just the little drops you send those souls who are here in this vale of tears, struggling with all vices for your love.” Navarro’s ability to see beyond the “vale of tears” and focus on the “moments of intense pleasure” demonstrates a passionate desire to find happiness in California, suggesting that Navarro still holds hope that the myth’s promises will become a reality for him. More than two years after his arrival in California, Navarro remains fervent in his belief that California will bring him overwhelming prosperity: “People make and lose millions, but that never discourages the spirit of its inhabitants. I do not know when, where, or how, but the day when we ourselves are owners of a stake in one of the mines cannot be far off.” Although Navarro never fully realized the promises of myth, his undying hope that California would bring him prosperity serves as further evidence of the power the adapted myth had over hopefuls during the Gold Rush, and foreshadows the way in which Dust Bowl migrants would later adapt the myth.

Though Reid and Navarro struggled to certain degrees to adapt the myth, others, like migrant Margaret Frink, maintained strong faith in the myth throughout both her journey and time in California, easily and seamlessly adapting her expectations. Frink, who came to California in 1850 at the age of 32 with her husband, believed the stories she heard about California almost to a fault, ignoring warnings from concerned neighbors about the difficulties of both the

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36 Navarro, Gold Rush Diary, 73.
37 Ibid., 73, 94.
38 Ibid., 111.
39 Ibid., 196.
“One Only Hope” 169

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36 Navarro, Gold Rush Diary, 73.
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http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol19/iss1/12
Despite their prosperity in Indiana, the allure of the myth overwhelmed Frink: “... we built a pleasant and convenient residence, having large grounds about it. But we were not yet satisfied. The exciting news coming back from California of the delightful climate and abundance of gold, caused us to resolve...” As Frink and her companions began their journey, the only difficulty that fazed them was the fear of reaching California too late and finding that the myth’s promises had run out. This fear of missing out on the myth prompted Frink’s wagon train to make questionable decisions and move at a dangerous pace, illustrating a very passionate and fervent belief that the promises of the myth were indeed a reality.

Because so many members of Frink’s party took the myth literally, adaptation of expectations became an even more arduous task. Frink and her party increased their speed dangerously, but some migrants—determined to reach the promises of the California myth as soon as possible—went even further, driving their animals to death. Others, like Mr. Avery, were so anxious to arrive in California that they risked their lives and set out on the trail on their own. Later along the trail, Frink describes a similarly determined woman trudging along alone with all her belongings on her back: “... a negro woman came tramping along through the heat and dust, carrying a cast-iron bake oven on her head, with her provisions and blanket piled on top—all she possessed in the world—bravely pushing on for California.”

At one point on the trail, Frink and her party were forced to leave behind the majority of their belongings, lightening their load to nothing more than the “bare necessities of life.” Despite this, one party member, Mr. Bryant, chose to take along one particular additional item that demonstrates his unrelenting faith in the myth of California: “his pick, with which to dig gold when he got to California.” Frink comments on the passion that both she and her fellow migrants possess, saying: “One only hope sustains all these unhappy pilgrims, that they will be able to get into California alive, where they can take a rest, and where the gold which they feel sure of finding will repay them for all their hardships and suffering.”

Although some of these migrants undoubtedly found happiness in California, there was a danger in such strong faith. Because their faith was so intricately linked to the specific facts of the myth—namely, in this case, the abundance of gold—some migrants, like Mr. Avery, were unable to adapt their understanding of the myth and, thus, were unable to survive in California.

When Frink finally arrived in California and learned of the shortcomings, she was understandably disappointed. She found the Californians—who mocked her for not understanding the culture and economy—rather harsh, and was wholly underwhelmed by the architecture of the state about which she had

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41 Ibid., 59.
42 Ibid., 82.
43 Ibid., 81.
44 Ibid., 103.
46 Ibid., 134.
47 Ibid., 134.
48 Ibid., 144.
49 Ibid., 157.
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decay, its walls and buildings being constructed of
large bricks dried in the sun.”

Despite these disappointments, Frink is able to adapt quickly, finding a
great deal of happiness in California: “But after a
year’s residence in the delightful valley of the Sacra-
mento, we had satisfied ourselves that no pleasanter
land for a home could be found, though we should
roam the wide world over. . . . The future of California
seemed to us full of promise, and here we resolved to
rest from our pilgrimage.”

Similarly, in the final lines
of her narrative, Frink shows no signs of regret in her
decision to come to California: “The progress of time
only confirmed us more strongly in our choice of a
home, and we never had occasion to regret the pro-
longed hardships of the toilsome journey that had its
happy ending for us in this fair land of California.”

Although Frink experienced hardships just as the
other Gold Rush migrants did, she was able to temper
her passionate belief in the myth enough to survive
while still maintaining her belief in the magic of
the myth. Though California did not live up to the fantastic
promises of the myth, the spirit of the myth—paired
with California’s extraordinary qualities and relative
newness—allows Frink to evolve her understanding of
the myth to focus on the benefits of California as
opposed to the discrepancies between the reality and
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Much like Frink and Navarro, many Dust Bowl
migrants found ways of adapting their understanding
of the myth, though their adaptations were much more
realistic and less specific than the expectations of the
Gold Rush migrants. Because these migrants came to
California out of desperation rather than desire, they
were much more forgiving and willing to find happi-
ness in even the simplest improvements in California.
Migrant Alma Brinlee describes the struggle to remain
positive in her response for Charles Todd’s survey.

Brinlee moved from Troutville, Oklahoma in 1937 at
the age of 37 to escape the environmental and eco-

53 Survey Response, Alma Brinlee to Charles L. Todd, August
1978, box 2, folder 2, Dust Bowl Migration Archive, 1938-1981,
North Bay Regional and Special Collections, Sonoma State
University.
54 Ibid.

nomic effects of the Dust Bowl, bringing with her a
husband and a daughter. Brinlee and her family spent
the first six months of their stay in a leaky tent, and
her daughter suffered at school due to the harsh
criticism she received for being an “Okie,” yet they
remained in California with their spirits intact.

When asked about her reaction to California after a year’s
time, Brinlee responded with hope for what California
held for both herself and her family, saying, “I kept
thinking we would return to Oklahoma, but I knew
that we were better off in California.”

Though she
faced flooding, persecution, and economic hardship,
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more opportunities than their home in Oklahoma,
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California certainly did offer a number of new opportu-
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50 Ibid., 158.
51 Ibid., 166.
52 Ibid., 167.
dreamed: “[Sutter’s Fort] was deserted and going to decay, its walls and buildings being constructed of large bricks dried in the sun.”

Despite these disappointments, Frink is able to adapt quickly, finding a great deal of happiness in California: “But after a year’s residence in the delightful valley of the Sacramento, we had satisfied ourselves that no pleasanter land for a home could be found, though we should roam the wide world over. . . . The future of California seemed to us full of promise, and here we resolved to rest from our pilgrimage.”

Similarly, in the final lines of her narrative, Frink shows no signs of regret in her decision to come to California: “The progress of time only confirmed us more strongly in our choice of a home, and we never had occasion to regret the prolonged hardships of the toilsome journey that had its happy ending for us in this fair land of California.”

Although Frink experienced hardships just as the other Gold Rush migrants did, she was able to temper her passionate belief in the myth enough to survive while still maintaining her belief in the magic of the myth. Though California did not live up to the fantastic promises of the myth, the spirit of the myth—paired with California’s extraordinary qualities and relative newness—allows Frink to evolve her understanding of the myth to focus on the benefits of California as opposed to the discrepancies between the reality and the myth, and find happiness in California.

Much like Frink and Navarro, many Dust Bowl migrants found ways of adapting their understanding of the myth, though their adaptations were much more realistic and less specific than the expectations of the Gold Rush migrants. Because these migrants came to California out of desperation rather than desire, they were much more forgiving and willing to find happiness in even the simplest improvements in California. Migrant Alma Brinlee describes the struggle to remain positive in her response for Charles Todd’s survey. Brinlee moved from Troutville, Oklahoma in 1937 at the age of 37 to escape the environmental and economic effects of the Dust Bowl, bringing with her a husband and a daughter. Brinlee and her family spent the first six months of their stay in a leaky tent, and her daughter suffered at school due to the harsh criticism she received for being an “Okie,” yet they remained in California with their spirits intact.

When asked about her reaction to California after a year’s time, Brinlee responded with hope for what California held for both herself and her family, saying, “I kept thinking we would return to Oklahoma, but I knew that we were better off in California.” Though she faced flooding, persecution, and economic hardship, Brinlee still believed that California would provide more opportunities than their home in Oklahoma, despite the fact that the myth proved to be untrue. California certainly did offer a number of new opportunities for Brinlee and her family, but the sense of hope that she maintains despite the difficulties she and her family encounter speaks to the power of the myth and

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50 Ibid., 158. 51 Ibid., 166. 52 Ibid., 167.
Brinlee’s ability to successfully adapt. Because Brinlee anticipated California as being the place where their situation would improve, a lingering sense of hope for and faith in California remains that is evident in her determination to stay and her ability to adapt.\textsuperscript{55}

Migrant Frances Walker also persevered through the hardships in California with the hope that California would provide her with a better life than she had in Oklahoma. After dealing with the difficult weather and working within the torturous sharecropping system, Walker and her husband and children decided to move to California where “the living might just be a little easier.”\textsuperscript{56} Although Walker came to California with the hopes of “[seeing] for ourselves ‘the land of milk and honey,’” she was far from thrilled with her new home.\textsuperscript{57} Walker cites terrible homesickness, which prompted her to wonder “if it was worth it to live here as we did,” especially considering the poverty and the discrimination that she and her fellow migrants faced.\textsuperscript{58} Despite such difficulties, Walker acknowledges that the reality of California was certainly better than their life in Oklahoma, with higher wages, better weather, and increased opportunities for her children, demonstrating her process of adaptation of the myth.\textsuperscript{59} As she concludes her letter, Walker emphasizes that her family and her fellow migrants were a hardy people who came to California in search of “the land of opportunity, not solely because someone said so they came to see for themselves.”\textsuperscript{60} Though Walker had the means to return to Oklahoma, her willingness to stay in California and her happiness in the state demonstrate her ability to adapt the myth to fit her situation. California was not “the land of milk and honey” that she expected; however, because she did not come expecting specific benefits from California, Walker was able to successfully adapt the myth to better fit the opportunities California offered and maintain her faith in California.

Thomas Smith also placed a significant amount of hope in the real California despite its shortcomings. Smith spent much of his young adult life moving around the Midwest, taking on various odd railroad jobs. When the Depression struck and work was difficult to come by, Smith and his wife migrated to California, hoping that they would find their fortunes like other “Okies” who had gone before them and return with large sums of cash.\textsuperscript{61} His hope in California and the opportunities that it promised was so strong that Smith and his wife made the decision to migrate “just like that.”\textsuperscript{62} Their decision to move quickly, based on relatively vague stories, demonstrates a willingness to believe that would prove invaluable to Smith’s survival in California.

Upon arriving in California, Smith’s understanding of the myth evolves rapidly and, arguably, uncon-
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\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Letter, Frances Walker to Charles L. Todd, December 28, 1974, box 1, folder 1, Dust Bowl Migration Archive, 1938-1981, North Bay Regional and Special Collections, Sonoma State University.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Ibid.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.

\(^{61}\) Interview, Thomas Smith to Michael Neely, March 4 and 16, 1981, California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Archives.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.
One Only Hope

One Only Hope sustains all these unhappy pilgrims. Despite the challenges he encountered in California, Smith found happiness in the smallest things, perhaps best demonstrated by his unwavering fascination with watermelons growing in December, giant redwoods and sequoias, and the general size of the produce in California, all of which reassured him that California was a special—if not magical—place. When Smith was down to his last $20, his wife begged him to send a telegram to their family in Oklahoma to ask for money to help them return home, yet Smith insisted that they “stay on a little while longer.”

Although Smith and his family struggled in California, when asked whether he regretted coming, Smith responded with hope and positivity: “We always had the idea that we would go back. . . . We kind of got oriented to the country. The times change, people change, ideas change, and you change your plans. . . . California has been good to us. I guess we’ll just stay.” Though Smith characterizes his decision to stay as one that happened by chance, his adamancy in remaining in California despite his near bankruptcy along with his determination to succeed illustrate how his ability to adapt the myth and maintain his hope in California were so invaluable.

Smith’s faith and unwillingness to relinquish the myth is only surpassed by the faith of Carlos Bulosan. Growing up in the Philippines, Bulosan relished stories of the prosperity in America, especially the story of Abraham Lincoln. Bulosan fervently believed that if Lincoln—“a poor boy [who] became a president of the United States”—could find greatness in America, then so could he. Determined to join in the opportunities, Bulosan eagerly saved funds for passage to America, finally arriving in the United States in 1930 amid the Great Depression. He arrived with great hope: “Everything seemed native and promising to me. It was like coming home after a long voyage, although as yet I had no home in this city.” Unfortunately, Bulosan quickly learned that America was not the land he expected: he was the victim of racism a number of times and was sold like a slave to a cannery upon his arrival. Despite these hardships, Bulosan’s faith in the myth that had sustained him for so long allowed him to adapt and slowly find happiness in America.

Although Bulosan had a very rudimentary understanding of America before arriving and thus did not understand where he wanted to be, it is evident through his travels that his heart lay in California—Bulosan returned to California countless times, unable to ignore the allure of the state. Like other Dust Bowl migrants, Bulosan’s faith in the myth prevented him from giving up, a sentiment he describes with passion whilst speaking to a migrant from Arkansas, saying: “. . . it’s only in giving the best we have that we can become a part of America.” Bulosan’s situation never truly improved—with racism running rampant up and down both the state and the West Coast—yet he never loses his faith. This undying faith—along with his incredible ability to adapt—is perhaps most evident

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Carlos Bulosan, America is in the Heart (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1943), 69.
67 Ibid., 99.
69 Ibid., 248.
of the United States”—could find greatness in America, then so could he.\textsuperscript{66} Determined to join in the opportunities, Bulosan eagerly saved funds for passage to America, finally arriving in the United States in 1930 amid the Great Depression. He arrived with great hope: “Everything seemed native and promising to me. It was like coming home after a long voyage, although as yet I had no home in this city.”\textsuperscript{67} Unfortunately, Bulosan quickly learned that America was not the land he expected: he was the victim of racism a number of times and was sold like a slave to a cannery upon his arrival.\textsuperscript{68} Despite these hardships, Bulosan’s faith in the myth that had sustained him for so long allowed him to adapt and slowly find happiness in America.

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in his lifelong desire to build a house in California, which he mentions throughout his narrative. After receiving a nasty beating from a police officer, Bulosan flees town on the train, yet still cannot put aside his hope for California: “I sat on top of an empty boxcar and watched the beautiful land passing by. I saw places where I thought I would someday like to build a home.”

Though Bulosan frequently curses California and the woe it brings him at times, he is still unable to lose hope entirely and continuously adapts his expectations for the myth. When near death, Bulosan demonstrates his deep connection with the myth through his fear of never seeing California again and, thus, never achieving the adapted dreams he had counted on, saying: “I was not afraid to die, but there were so many things to do. . . . I thought I should never live to see California again.” As he ends his narrative, Bulosan sums up his experience and the process of adapting the dream: “It came to me that no man—no one at all—could destroy my faith in America again. It was something that had grown out of my defeats and successes . . . It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends . . . something that grew out of our desire to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment.” Although Bulosan certainly struggled with the process of adaptation, his continued ability to adapt the myth testifies to both his resiliency as well as the myth’s allure.

Migrant Harold Riley came to California at the young age of 7 in 1940. He kept his belief in California alive despite being “treated coldly.” He describes his struggle, saying, “[I] felt somewhat lost and frustrated, but hopeful.” Similarly, Lynne Prout—a migrant who came to California in 1933 at the age of 15—demonstrated the same sort of resilience and a lasting belief in California. Though Prout faced a California that was “not very hospitable” and nearly starved, she still regards her move to California as a high point in her life: “But as the years have passed I have come to view [this] era as the biggest experience of my life, and my mind constantly returns to it.” Although the migrants who came to California during the Dust Bowl faced incredible hardship, their ability to adapt the myth and maintain faith demonstrates how crucial the myth—and a continued belief in it—were to finding happiness in the land of plenty.

Though the myth has adapted and evolved enormously over time, it continues to capture the imaginations of countless even to this day, begging the question of why and how the myth persists. Although it is impossible to definitively say what allows for its survival, one potential contributing factor is a combination of the constant hope for a better future and the resilience of the human spirit. Because it is counterintuitive for humans to have no hope for

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70 Ibid., 157.
71 Ibid., 298.
72 Ibid., 326-27.
73 Survey Response, Harold Riley to Charles L. Todd, July 1978, box 2, folder 2, Dust Bowl Migration Archive, 1938-1981, North Bay Regional and Special Collections, Sonoma State University.
74 Letter, Lynne Prout to Charles L. Todd, October 17, 1978, box 2, folder 3, Dust Bowl Migration Archive, 1938-1981, North Bay Regional and Special Collections, Sonoma State University.
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improvement in the future, California’s myth serves as the vessel to carry that hope along. As Margaret Frink explains, California was the “one only hope [that] sustains all these unhappy pilgrims”—the only thing that pushed them along on their journey.\footnote{Frink, “Adventures of a Party of Goldseekers,” 144.} A Dust Bowl migrant camp in Visalia also reflects this sentiment, presented aptly in a picture over the stage in the main gathering area of the camp: “Picture over stage: painted by a camper...Shows past, present, and future of the migrants. Past: ditch-bank camps; present: govt. [sic] camps with metal shelters; future: a question mark but rosy.”\footnote{Notes, Charles L. Todd, August 6, 1940, Dust Bowl Migration Archive.} For many of the migrants, California truly was a question mark—they did not know what they would encounter once they arrived or if the opportunities reputed to be present would be a reality, yet the myth provided them with enough “rosiness” to allow them to persevere rather than despair.

Just as California provided the migrants with something upon which they could pin their hopes, it also provided these resilient individuals with a challenge—one from which they were unwilling to back down. Though there were some migrants, like Mr. Avery, who were not up to this challenge, many came with unrelenting attitudes, and this, paired with the hope they had already invested in California, created a powerful fighting spirit within the migrants that pushed them to achieve more than they would have otherwise. Frances Walker displayed this spirit, and believed that it pervaded the entire migrant community: “They thought when they came to California it was the land of opportunity, not solely because someone said so they came to see for themselves. California was there, a part of the vast Union, and maybe it was a challenge [sic].”\footnote{Letter, Frances Walker to Charles L. Todd, December 28, 1974, Dust Bowl Migration Archive.} Similarly, Ramón Gil Navarro describes seeing nearly all the newcomers arriving with a strong fighting spirit: “Among those arriving you can see a gesture of contempt for that misery and ravage among those departing and a look of disdainful challenge.”\footnote{Navarro, Gold Rush Diary, 22.} Because so many saw the myth as a challenge, they were more willing to adapt it to match their experience, even if only for the sake of self-preservation. Although the incoming migrants were well-aware, undoubtedly, of the stories of failure that came from the state, their unrelenting spirits—along with the powerful emotions that the myth inspired—pushed them to, as Walker said, try California for themselves with the hope that the myth would come true for them if they fought hard enough. This fighting spirit not only helped migrants cope with the realities of California, but also helped build and sustain the myth of California.

Although hope and a spirit of challenge certainly help to explain how it has persisted, perhaps the most essential factor in the myth’s ability to continue exists in the innate majesty of the state itself. California may not have been the paradise that the myth described, but it was a paradise in its own right—it boasted during the Gold Rush and the Dust Bowl plentiful resources, a bustling economy, and new and exciting opportunities. Similarly, the state’s natural beauty...
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⁷⁶ Notes, Charles L. Todd, August 6, 1940, Dust Bowl Migration Archive.
⁷⁸ Navarro, Gold Rush Diary, 22.
that has captivated visitors for years carries a sense of magic in and of itself. As Alma Brinlee states, California is "beautiful and green and prosperous for some." Even Navarro—despite the discrimination and hardships that he encountered in California—found himself utterly amazed by the sheer grandeur of California, saying, "Only in California, itself exceptional in just about everything in the world." With California being so beautiful and extraordinary, it is only logical that fantastical myths would follow.

Today, many continue to struggle with the discrepancy between the myth and reality of California. Some see the difficulties in California—whether they be financial, political, or economic—as signs that California’s reign is coming to an end. John D. Sutter suggests that the dream is "fizzling out," saying, "No longer is California the larger-than-life destination where anything's possible—the pot of gold at the end of our collective path westward." Though some migrants find themselves disillusioned with California’s reality, most still carry the myth with them. One migrant, Sara Flores, has adapted the myth to her circumstances well, saying: "It’s exactly what I pictured: a better life, a better opportunity. Disneyland." Although the reality of California continues to fall short of the myth, migrants’ ability to adapt the myth over time—regardless of how bad the circumstances get—will ensure that it remains a staple in the American imagination.

Ultimately, California’s greatness stems not only from its natural beauty or the real opportunities it offers, but from the sense of wonder that the myth has surrounded it with, providing the state with countless newcomers determined to succeed and live the dream. Though the myth evolved dramatically since its inception, its ability to survive depends not only on the state’s natural beauty and wealth of opportunities but also on migrants’ continued faith in it. If migrants had been unable to adapt their expectations and understanding of the myth—giving up and returning home with the tales of woe—it is likely that the myth would not have survived, at least not in the same form. The myth continues to portray California as a magical and extraordinary place because of migrants’ willingness to see it as such.

Navarro, in the final lines of his diary, expresses great sorrow as he leaves the shores of California, describing it as the ultimate, larger-than-life land of adventure, saying: "Yesterday we lost sight of the beaches of California just when it was getting dark. With the last rays of sunshine, we lost sight of the golden land of California, the country of marvels, the country of the thousand and one nights, the country that was the scene of so much happiness and so much suffering of mine." Although California is a land of chance, the myth persists strongly within the hearts of hopefuls around the world, and because of this, California will continue to exist as an island in the imagination.

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79 Survey Response, Alma Brinlee to Charles L. Todd, August 1978, Dust Bowl Migration Archive.
80 Navarro, Gold Rush Diary, 104.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 251.
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American imagination—a land filled with hope.

Kayla Unger is a senior History and English double major, with an emphasis in United States history. The research for this paper stems from a long-time interest in California and the stories that it inspires. Kayla would like to thank Professor Robert Senkewicz for his assistance and support throughout the research and writing process (in addition to the push to become a History major).

APPENDIX

FIGURE 1

American imagination—a land filled with hope.

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FIGURE 2


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