

THE GOLD PLACERS OF LOS ANGELES.

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Note.—The Spanish plural of placer is *placeros*. The Argonauts of '49 Americanized it to *placers*.

To the gold seekers of the early '50's Los Angeles was known as a cow country. The gold miner was the aristocrat of that period and the pastoral people of Southern California were looked upon by the Argonauts as financial if not social pariahs.

The seekers after the golden fleece who came to California by the southern routes, poured into Los Angeles by the thousands through the Cajon Pass, through the San Geronio, and by way of Warner's ranch. Bleared and half-blinded by the burning sands of the desert, and worn out with months of travel over the arid alkaline plains, they reached sleepy Los Angeles in no mood to appreciate the salubrity of its climate or the fertility of its soil. They saw the hills and plains covered with thousands of cattle. They found the inhabitants calmly indifferent to the mad rush for gold. To the gold seekers such a country had no attractions.

They were not seeking climate and they had no use for any soil that was not mixed with gold dust. So they hurried on over the mountains to the gold fields of Northern California. Few, if any, of them knew that in the cañons and arroyos of the despised "cow country" the first gold ever discovered in California had been found; and that the first mining rush ever known in California had been to the foot hills of that same cow country.

The first authenticated discovery of gold in California was made in territory now included in Los Angeles County.

It was made March 9, 1841 by Francisco Lopez (for many years mayordomo of the San Fernando Mission) in the San Feliciano Cañon. This cañon is about forty miles northwesterly from Los Angeles City and eight miles westerly from the town of Newhall.

Don Abel Stearns gives this account of the discovery:

"Lopez with a companion while in search of some stray horses, about midday stopped under some trees and tied their horses to feed. While resting in the shade, Lopez with his sheath knife dug up some wild onions and in the dirt discovered a piece of

gold. Searching further he found more. On his return to town he showed these pieces to his friends, who at once declared there must be a placer of gold there."

The news of the discovery soon spread from Santa Barbara to San Diego and the first gold rush in the history of California began.

In a few weeks hundreds of people were engaged in washing and winnowing the sands of the gold fields.

Col. J. J. Warner, who visited the gold fields shortly after their discovery, says: "The discoveries of gold placers in that year embraced the greater part of the county drained by the Santa Clara River from a point fifteen or twenty miles from the mouth to its source and easterly beyond them to Mount San Bernardino."

There was a scarcity of water in the diggings and the methods of extracting the gold from the gravel were crude and wasteful. One of the most common was panning or washing the dirt in a *batea* or bowl shaped Indian basket.

Another method of mining was by means of a crude form of sluice or long Tom. A strip of manta or coarse unbleached muslin a yard wide and several yards long was stretched on a level gently sloping piece of ground near a stream of water. The edges of the manta on each side were raised about a foot high and fastened at short intervals to stakes with raw hide thongs. This trough or sluice was filled with gold bearing gravel and a stream of water turned onto it, from a ditch at the upper end, until the gravel was washed away. A narrow board fastened at the lower end prevented the gold from escaping. The gold which settled in the bottom of the sluice was separated from the residium of sand by panning.

The first parcel of California gold dust ever coined at the United States mint in Philadelphia was taken from the product of these mines. It was carried in a sailing vessel around Cape Horn. It consisted of 18.34 ounces and was deposited in the mint July 8, 1843, by Alfred Robinson. Its value after coining was \$344.75, over \$19 to the ounce. It belonged to Don Abel Stearns.

Robinson in a letter dated at New York, August 6, 1843, informing Stearns of the result of the coinage of his gold shipment and other items of news says:

"How pleased you would be to make a visit to your native country. What a change you would find. What improvements! You will be enabled to come via Panama or rather I should say, per Canal. The Messrs. Baring & Co., of London, have made a contract with the 'Central Government' and in all probability the con-

tract will be finished in five years; so at last the long talked of route through the isthmus will be accomplished."

Since that letter was written nearly seventy years have passed and still that canal is unfinished. But in the interval between then and now more than a billion dollars of California gold has been taken across the isthmus of Panama.

No authentic data in regard to the yield of the San Fernando placers, as these mines were commonly called, exists. Beyond the granting by Governor Alvarado of an *expediente* or official title to Lopez for his discovery and the appointment of Don Ygnacio del Valle (on whose rancho the discovery was made) *Encargado de justicia*—commissioner of justice—to preserve order in the mining district the territorial government seems to have taken no further notice of the mines. It collected no statistics of the amount of gold taken out of the placers and enacted no mining laws.

Some of the pioneer Americans who visited the placers give estimates. Wm. Heath Davis in his "Sixty Years in California," places the amount at \$80,000 to \$100,000 for the first two years after the discovery. Don Abel Stearns states that from the time of their discovery to 1847, "Some six or eight thousand dollars were taken out per annum." Bancroft says that "by December, 1843, two thousand ounces of gold (about \$38,000) had been taken from the San Fernando Mines." Don Antonio Coronel informed the writer that he, with the assistance of three Indian laborers, in the Spring of 1842, took out \$600 worth of gold dust in two months. Don Abel Stearns says that the mines were worked "principally by Sonorenses (Sonorians) who were accustomed to work in placers. They met with good success."

In the fall of 1854 began the Kern River excitement—one of the most famous mining rushes in the history of California gold mining.

Gold was discovered on the head waters of the Kern River or Rio Bravo. Reports were spread abroad of the fabulous richness of the mines and the "rush was on." For a time it seemed as if the northern mines would be depopulated. From Stockton to the mines, a distance of three hundred miles, for weeks the plains of the San Joaquin were literally speckled with honest miners on foot, on horseback, on stages, and in wagons bound for the mines. Every steamer down the coast came loaded to the guards with miners, merchants, gamblers, and adventurers of all kinds, bound for the new El Dorado via Los Angeles. The sleepy old metropolis of the cow counties awoke to find itself transformed into a hustling mining camp. Business in mining supplies was brisk and times

were lively in other directions. The *Southern Californian* of March 7, 1855 says: "Last Sunday night was a brisk night for killing. Four men were shot and killed, and several wounded in shooting affrays." These motley collections of gold hunters made their way over the Tehachapi summit to the mines.

The mines though rich were limited and the disappointed miners beat their way back to civilization as best they could. Some of them turned their attention to prospecting in the mountains south of the Tehachapi and many new discoveries were made. In April, 1855, a party entering the mountains by way of the Cajon Pass penetrated to the head waters of the San Gabriel. Here in some of the cañons they found good prospects; but, the water failing, they were temporarily compelled to suspend operations. The Santa Anita placers, about fifteen miles from this city, were discovered and for a time worked secretly—the miners making from \$6 to \$10 each per day.

Work was actively resumed in the San Fernando diggings. Francisco Gracia working a gang of Indians in 1855 took out \$65,000. One nugget worth \$1900 was found. During 1856 and 1857 mining and prospecting were continued. In 1858 rich diggings were struck on the San Gabriel. Mining operations were begun on a more extended scale. The Santa Anita Mining Company was organized; D. Marchessault, president; V. Beaudry, treasurer; capital, \$50,000. A ditch four miles long was cut around the foot of the mountains. Hydraulic works were erected. February 15, 1859, when the works were completed, the company gave a sumptuous dinner to invited guests from the city. The success of the enterprise was toasted in bumpers of champagne, and wine and wit flowed freely. These mines paid handsomely for several years.

During the year 1859 the cañon of the San Gabriel was prospected for forty miles, and "the color" was obtained in every instance. Some of the bar claims were quite rich—as high as \$8 to the pan being obtained in some places. From a hill claim four men took out \$80 in one day. Two Mexicans with a common wooden bowl or batea washed out \$90 in two days. Two hydraulic companies were taking out \$1000 a week. In July, 300 men were at work in the cañon and all reported doing well. A stage ran from the city to the mines. Three stores at Eldoradoville supplied the miners with the necessaries of life; and several saloons, with gambling accompaniments, the luxuries.

The editor of the *Star* in the issue of December 3, 1859, indulges in roseate dreams of the mineral wealth of Los Angeles. He says:

"Gold placers are now being worked from Fort Tejon to San

Bernardino. Rich deposits have been discovered in the northern part of the county. The San Gabriel mines have been worked very successfully this season. The Santa Anita placers are giving forth their golden harvest. Miners are at work in the San Fernando hills rolling out the gold, and in the hills beyond discoveries have been made which prove the whole district to be one grand placer."

After that the deluge. The rainy season began early in December. For three days and nights it rained continuously. Nearly a foot of water fell. In the narrow cañon of the San Gabriel River the waters rose to an unprecedented height and swept everything before them. The miner's wheels, sluices, long toms, wing dams, coffer dams and all other dams went floating off toward the sea.

The year 1860 was a prosperous one for the miners, notwithstanding the disastrous flood of December, 1859. The increased water supply afforded an opportunity to work dry claims. Some of the strikes have the sound of the flush days of '49: "Baker & Smith realized from their claim \$800 in eight days." "Driver & Co. washed out \$350 of dust in two hours."

In the spring of 1862, Wells, Fargo & Co. were shipping to San Francisco \$12,000 of gold dust a month by steamer and probably as much more was sent by other shippers or taken by private parties; all this the product of the San Fernando, San Gabriel and Santa Anita placers.

In the winter of 1868 an immense flood of water swept through the cañon of the San Gabriel River obliterating ever trace of mining operations and carrying with it all the flumes and other mining machinery on the river. The flood caused an abandonment of all mining operations for several years.

In July, 1871, two men, Matfield and Roberts, began the construction of a hydraulic system at the head of the cañon. In 1872 they completed the construction of a flume five miles in length and one of the most complete and substantial ever constructed in any mining camp in the state. Their venture was a success. They took out large quantities of gold. Their success induced others to try hydraulic mining. As late as 1876 there were two hydraulic companies working in the cañon, one company reported a yield of \$1,365 for a run of twenty-six days, working five men—an average of \$10.50 a day to the man.

The yield of the Los Angeles placers can be ascertained only approximately. Major Ben C. Truman in his *Semi-Tropical California* (a book written in 1874) says:

"During the past eighteen years, Messrs. Ducommon and Jones,

merchants of Los Angeles, have purchased in one way and another over two million dollars' worth of gold dust taken from the placer claims of the San Gabriel River, while it is fair to presume that among other merchants and to parties in San Francisco has been distributed at least a like amount."

Add to this estimate the amount taken out of the San Fernando placers from 1841 to 1847, and from these placers and all the other mines except the San Gabriel from 1855 down to the present time, and the yield of the Los Angeles placer mines would reach if not exceed five million dollars.

Our mineral resources are far from being exhausted. With abundant capital, improved appliances and cheaper methods of working them, our quartz lodes and gold placers will yield richer returns in the future than they have in the past. It may seem a rash statement to make—that the average yield of gold to each man engaged in the Los Angeles placers equaled if it did not exceed the average yield per man of the northern mines at the very acme of placer mining—yet the truth of it can be substantiated. Careful statisticians estimate that in 1853, the year of the greatest production of the northern placers, the average yield per man for those actually engaged in mining was less than \$2.00 per day; the average yield per man of the Los Angeles placers in 1858, '59, '60, '61 and '62 greatly exceeded that amount.

Such in brief is the history of fifty years of placer mining in Los Angeles. It is not the story of the treasure vaults of nature unlocked by the blow of a pick, nor is it a tale of disaster and loss. It is, rather, the record of fair remuneration for the labor expended and the capital employed.