

# Celebrating 100 Years of *California History*: A Conversation between *California History* Editors Richard J. Orsi (1989–2000) and Mary Ann Irwin (2020–present)

Mary Ann Irwin (MAI):

With this issue, *California History* celebrates one hundred years of publishing the history of California.<sup>1</sup> To help us celebrate, I asked Dick Orsi (editor of 47 issues and 280-plus essays) to pick his favorite *California History* essays. Dick was horrified. You'd think I asked him to name his favorite child.

But before we begin, let me briefly recap the historical moment—1989—when Dick became editor. The preceding year, a coterie of western historians (Patricia Limerick, Richard White, and others) overturned decades of thinking and writing about the American West. The “New Western History” blasted shotgun-sized holes into the triumphalist, white-male-centered model proposed by nineteenth-century historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Practitioners insisted that western history be told from the perspectives of the dispossessed, colonized, and oppressed. The challenge they issued might explain the decision of the California Historical Society (CHS) to hand off editorship of its in-house publication, *California History*. CHS moved journal headquarters from its Southern California business office to a public university in the San Francisco Bay Area—California State University, Hayward—and, for the first time, chose a university-trained, doctorate-holding historian to serve as editor. It made a difference.

---

*California History*, Vol. 99, Number 1, pp. 1–8, ISSN 0162-2897, electronic ISSN 2327-1485. © 2022 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/ch.2022.99.1.1>.

Make no mistake: *California History* published excellent scholarship in the years 1922–1988. But I think it is fair to say that Dick was instrumental in creating today’s *California History*, a rigorously researched, carefully peer-reviewed, and scrupulously edited quarterly that publishes the best in new and cutting-edge scholarship about California, the West, and the Pacific World. (And now, rebuttal from Dick Orsi . . .)

Richard J. Orsi (RJO):

I will admit only to saying “yes” when Mary Ann asked me to choose the “best” articles published under my editorship, from my first issue (vol. 68, nos. 1–2, Spring/Summer 1989) through my last (vol. 73, no. 3, October 2000). I immediately questioned that decision: it meant reviewing twelve volumes, four issues each, most of which include at least four articles, with some special issues containing ten or more essays. The University of California Press ultimately published five of these special issues as books. Four book/special issues represent CHS’s *California History* Sesquicentennial Series; the first of these four Sesquicentennial issue/books were published in 1989 and included field specialists’ reinterpretations of major themes in California history. Numbering a total of forty articles, the Sesquicentennial issues presented outstanding historical work.

MAI:

I agree 100 percent: the Sesquicentennial issues were outstanding. This was the difference it made, having a professional historian as editor. It meant that Dick could reach out to friends and colleagues to assemble an amazing editorial board. The individuals listed in his first editorial board include many of my own personal icons. But the transition was rocky: the journal came to CSU Hayward with no content—no potential articles under submission or even in peer review. Nonetheless, by October 1989, Dick was rolling. Jim Gregory shared a taste of his soon-to-be-classic *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (1989), and Dick signaled his commitment to telling the history of California “from the bottom up.” Richard K. Beardsley and Lane Ryo Hirabayashi offered a fine article on the Japanese American community of Delta.<sup>2</sup> Another excellent contribution was “Biddy Mason’s Los Angeles 1856–1891,” written by Dolores Hayden, future award-winning urban historian-poet-architect, whose later works pressed Los Angeles to recognize the contributions of women and diverse ethnic groups in that city’s development.<sup>3</sup>

Dick’s next issue was the remarkable special issue *Envisioning California*, which shared the proceedings of the first conference devoted to what was then the emerging field of California studies. Seated in the audience, Dick decided he would convince twelve literary scholars, political scientists, and historians who spoke at the conference to publish expanded versions of their talks to the journal. The result was a far-reaching, interdisciplinary approach to understanding the land, people, and places of California, including essays on art, literature, education, and public policy by such luminaries as Luis Valdez, James D. Houston, Gerald Haslam, and Maxine Hong Kingston.<sup>4</sup> Volume 69 (1989) was a portent of the breadth and depth of scholarship to come.

Another excellent special issue, *Yosemite and Sequoia: A Century of California National Parks*, came the following summer, commemorating the 100th anniversary of those two sublime natural resources.<sup>5</sup> National parks and environmental historian Alfred Runte

served as a guest editor. Beautifully illustrated with photographs, drawings, and ephemera, the issue includes essays by nine scholars, including one devoted to John Muir. This issue is one of my top picks.

RJO:

I, however, ultimately gave up on choosing a handful of articles to identify as the “best.” The essays I highlight here are not “better” than the many excellent works not chosen. Rather, I chose them because of the importance of their subject matter to California, in terms of both the state’s historical development and today’s society; the originality of the subject and analysis; the breadth of primary and secondary sources consulted; the fluency and beauty of the writing; and the extent to which the article provoked further thought and inquiry. The articles discussed below represent a blend of these criteria. They are representative examples of the finest thinking and expression published *at that time*.

Anthropologist Lowell J. Bean’s 1992 “Indians of California: Diverse and Complex Peoples” led off the “Indians of California” special issue.<sup>6</sup> Even at that time, popular culture, state historical sites, and texts used in school classrooms depicted California’s Native peoples as primitive, lazy “stone age” remnants, few in number and simple in subsistence, economy, technology, culture, and organization, content to wander and barely survive by foraging whatever nature provided, thus rendering them invisible and irrelevant to “modern” civilization. A pioneering scholar, Bean reviewed the findings of two generations of scientists, social scientists, and humanists and overwhelmingly disproved these lingering fictions. Bean appended to his endnotes a reference list of seventy important works, contributing to a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of historical and contemporary California Native cultures. Bean’s article in this special issue served as a valuable resource for general historians and other readers, and especially for elementary, secondary, and college teachers seeking to improve their curricula.

MAI:

The “Indians of California” special issue is one of my favorites, too. It featured essays by nine contributors, including Bean, who considered California’s Indigenous peoples in all their complexity and diversity.<sup>7</sup> The issue included a portfolio of “California Indian Artists” with sixteen brilliant color plates and an essay about the artists, and Albert L. Hurtado’s important “Sexuality in California’s Franciscan Missions: Cultural Perceptions and Sad Realities.”<sup>8</sup> The author of *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (1988) extended the scope of his *California History* essay for his 1999 classic *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California*.<sup>9</sup>

RJO:

Business historian William P. McGowan’s 1993 “Fault Lines: Seismic Safety and the Changing Political Economy of California’s Transportation System” offered much more than its title implied.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on the question of highway seismic safety allowed McGowan to uncover why so much appeared to go wrong in California’s political and governmental systems, from the 1960s forward. As late as the 1960s, improvements to California’s highway infrastructure could generally be made when needed. Popular with

political leaders and the public, the state's stable highway program was insulated from ephemeral political whims and was funded by a reliable, essentially sacrosanct gasoline tax whose revenues could not legally be diverted to other purposes. Freeway bridges and multitiered structures appeared to be maintained and safe, particularly from earthquake damage. In reality, though, the more sophisticated technologies available to state engineers in the early 1970s showed that many roadbeds and freeway supports were alarmingly vulnerable. But the state's politics, as well as state, national, and indeed international economic troubles, blocked improvements in highway safety, paving the way for deadly freeway collapses, as well as the general deterioration of state infrastructure. McGowan's research and analysis explained why freeway overpasses and elevated roadbeds were collapsing, and why, by the 1990s, similar deterioration was evident throughout other state facilities: public schools, universities, prisons, and elsewhere.

MAI:

My favorites will always include articles about women, so I chose 1993's "Women in California History" special issue, in which Michael E. Engh shared his research on Mary Julia Workman, "Catholic Conscience of Los Angeles"; John H. M. Laslett explored the complicated relationship between labor leader Rose Pesotta and the Los Angeles chapter of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union; Sandra Schackel, close student of western women's history, offered a portrait of actress and "Uncommon Heroine" Barbara Stanwyck; and Richard A. García delved into United Farmworkers cofounder Dolores Huerta as "Woman, Organizer, and Symbol."<sup>11</sup>

Another personal favorite is the 1994 special issue "Japanese Americans in California," whose five essays describe various aspects of life for California Japanese Americans. These include Eiichiro Azuma's study of the Japanese immigrant farmers of Walnut Grove, who survived despite the state's restrictive alien land laws. The issue pays tribute as well to the elegant paintings, watercolors, and prints of influential University of California, Berkeley, art teacher Chiura Obata (1885–1975), who was incarcerated in the camps during World War II.<sup>12</sup>

RIO:

Focused, tightly researched and reasoned, Richard Lowitt's 1995 "The Hetch Hetchy Controversy, Phase II: The 1913 Senate Debate" examined a critical event in the environmental movement in California and the nation.<sup>13</sup> To free itself of the high prices, limited capacity, and unreliability of the Spring Valley Water Company, San Francisco's water service monopoly, the city applied to the federal government for permission to dam the Tuolumne River at the mouth of one of Yosemite National Park's most beautiful valleys, the Hetch Hetchy, intending to transport Sierra water two hundred miles to a publicly owned water agency. The proposal ignited the acrimonious and much-studied "Hetch Hetchy Debate." "Preservationists," led by John Muir and supporters, opposed the plan, favoring perpetual protection of undefiled nature on public lands, most especially in national parks. Their opponents, "utilitarian conservationists," favored protecting wild lands for "wise use" in the public interest. The controversy climaxed in a U.S. Senate debate in 1913. Many historians have closely studied the controversy, almost all focusing on the clash between

preservationists and utilitarians. Lowitt, however, a distinguished specialist in Progressive Era history, returned to verbatim records of the testimony and senators' biographies and accounts of the debate. Surprisingly, although they discussed public land preservation versus utilitarian use, that debate was practically irrelevant to the senators, almost all of whom favored "wise use." Instead, the senators' discussion revolved around public versus private interests, specifically whether private monopoly interests, like the Spring Valley Water Company and Pacific Gas and Electric, or the public should be allowed to exploit national park resources. With antimonopoly Progressives dominant, the U.S. Senate approved San Francisco's application, casting the city's proposed dam as a democratic reform that favored the public interest over private monopoly. Lowitt's analysis complicated or fully overturned scholarly understanding of this milestone in environmentalist activism.

#### MAI:

Also published in 1995 was "Mexican Americans in California," for which Richard A. García returned as special issue coeditor. The issue's nine articles, which analyzed the arc of Mexican Americans' encounters with European Americans in California from 1820 to 1994, included these noteworthy contributions: Richard Griswold del Castillo, "Neither Activists nor Victims: Mexican Women's Historical Discourse: The Case of San Diego, 1820–1850"; Matt Garcia, "'Just Put on That Padua Hills Smile': The Mexican Players and the Padua Hills Theatre, 1931–1974"; Alma M. García, "'I Work for My Daughter's Future': Entrepreneurship and Mexican American Women"; and Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Homegirls, Cholas, and Pachucas in Cinema: Taking Over the Public Sphere."<sup>14</sup>

#### RJO:

Skipping ahead to 1998, Donald J. Pisani's "'I Am Resolved Not to Interfere, but Permit All to Work Freely': The Gold Rush and American Resource Law," appeared as the second volume in the Sesquicentennial Series, *A Golden State: Mining and Economic Development in Gold Rush California*.<sup>15</sup> A leading historian of American water and mineral rights, Pisani presented the gold rush as a window into California's broader impact on the nation and the world. His title quoted the explanation given by U.S. Army Colonel Richard Mason for his fateful decisions as California's last military governor before U.S. statehood. Far from the gold fields and with only a small army, Mason accepted his inability to control the tens of thousands of would-be miners rampaging inland following the 1848 discovery of gold. Mason chose instead to abolish Mexican mining laws and to permit free access to those determined to profit from California's mineral wealth, land, water, and other resources. The vacuum of authority that followed Mason's decision resulted in chaos. In the absence of laws and precedent in remote areas, the newcomers made their own rules, an outcome common on American frontiers traveling ahead of governmental organization. Miners typically recognized the rights of first-comers to mark and file claims to occupy and use resources, especially land and water, *free of charge*, as long as they continued to work their claims. After statehood, California's miner-controlled legislature in the early 1850s codified into state law the rules previously standardized by local miners, the results of which included the rapid, typically wasteful and environmentally destructive spread of mining. As California miners and mining companies followed new discoveries throughout the West, they spread their fundamentally homegrown concepts

of free access to public land, water, and other resources, practices that took root across the region and ultimately shaped national law and practice. Explosive economic growth resulted, but, by the nineteenth century's end, as Pisani put it, "California common law" had become "the law of mining west of the Missouri River," embedding in state and national law "the principle that nature existed solely for profit." Thus, the gold rush's national legacy included waste of lands and resources, environmental degradation, and increasing corporate dominance over public lands.

I must mention Sucheng Chan's "A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush," which appeared in *California History* and in *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California* (University of California Press, 2000), the third in the Sesquicentennial Series.<sup>16</sup> Described by one book reviewer as "a concentrated tour de force," this was a stunning history, historiography, and analysis of the gold-rush experiences of California ethnic groups—Mexican (including the already present Californios), Chilean, Chinese, Irish, German, French, Italian, British (including Australians), Hawaiian, and African American. Unlike most such studies, Chan analyzed groups' positive and negative interactions, with each other as well as with the domineering Americans. The French, for example, because of their shared Catholicism, culture, and languages, and despite their status as Caucasians, were less interested in fraternizing with their Anglo-American peers, and much more likely to assimilate and even intermarry among Spanish-speaking groups. Analogously, even though each suffered hostility and injustice at Caucasian hands, Chinese and African newcomers generally "failed to identify with one another," even showing "considerable antipathy to one another." Some African Americans and Chinese formally complained to authorities about being grouped together under state law, with the Chinese expressing "negative views" of both blacks and Native Americans. Mutual hostility marked Chinese and Mexican relations as well. This was Chan's most important contribution, both in this article and in her scholarship more broadly: she urged historians to move beyond the standard of single-group analysis to explore the complex processes of ethnic assimilation. Her work demonstrated how complex and pernicious racism can be, how it allows whites to justify oppression of others, and the degree to which race hatred has structured a fiercely competitive, unequal society, stratified in labor, housing, and general relationships. Too few historians have taken up Chan's challenge.

Donna C. Schuele's "None Could Deny the Eloquence of This Lady: Women, Law, and Government in California, 1850–1890" appeared in volume 4 of the Sesquicentennial Series, *Taming the Elephant: Politics, Government, and Law in Pioneer California* (University of California Press, 2003), and in *California History* under the editorship of my successor, Janet Fireman.<sup>17</sup> Schuele examined the contradictory legal position facing California women after statehood. Holding a doctorate in both law and history, Schuele drew from a wide array of primary documents and secondary historical works, in addition to legal sources infrequently plumbed by historians. Following eastern states, California's 1849 constitution prohibited women from voting. Unlike almost all other states that followed English common law, in which women lost all property rights at marriage, California's first constitution retained Spanish women's equal property rights with men. The new constitution specified that, at marriage, women retained sole ownership and control of

their real and personal property, and furthermore were to enjoy joint ownership and control of property acquired during marriage. Married women retained the right to make separate wills, to keep their wages, to inherit all common property when their husbands died, or to retain half of jointly held property following divorce. However, with women excluded from suffrage and thus without direct political power, the early state legislatures—all male—soon enacted laws that limited these rights. Early judges likewise interpreted statutes in ways that dispossessed married women of their individual and joint property. Schuele's important article traced the decades-long struggle of nineteenth-century women to secure not only the franchise, which historians have examined at great length, but also women's efforts to own property independently and equally, equal rights to work, and, perhaps most importantly, access to practice law themselves. [MAI: This is one of my picks too—I frequently cite this study in my own work.]

MAI:

I particularly like Michelle Nickerson's 2009 "Politically Desperate Housewives: Women and Conservatism in Postwar Los Angeles" because I use it in the classroom, as a West Coast counterpoint to Joanne Meyerowitz's *Not June Cleaver*.<sup>18</sup> Nickerson's *California History* essay documented the grassroots activism of conservative women in Cold War Los Angeles, exploring how hostility toward the African American civil rights movement spurred the women's efforts, and confirming the women's significance in developing the far-right edge of the Republican Party, nationally and in California.

Another favorite: Charles Wollenberg's 2012 "Dear Earl': The Fair Play Committee, Earl Warren, and Japanese Internment." Impressively researched and well written, this article offered a significant contribution to California's torturous history of civil rights and civil liberties, especially the repressive role played by Earl Warren as California's attorney general (1939–1943) and then as governor (1943–1953).<sup>19</sup> Warren later regretted his role in internment but, of course, too late.

I must not omit Michael F. Magliari's 2020 "Masters, Apprentices, and Kidnappers: Indian Servitude and Slave Trafficking in Humboldt County, California, 1860–1863," which I also use in the classroom.<sup>20</sup> It too offers a West Coast variant on readings about indenture in the British colonies and slavery in the antebellum United States. Magliari's meticulous study of Humboldt County indentures provides a thought-provoking and brilliant analysis of an abysmal moment in California history.

And I will admit partiality to my own first special issue, a reflection on controversial memorials and monuments. The issue was important to me, personally, because I believe that historians can help Americans through the difficult conversations that we must have if we are to heal the divisions caused by our nation's painful legacy of slavery, conquest, genocide, and the ongoing challenge of race hatred.<sup>21</sup>

I must also single out Diane M. T. North's 2020 "California and the 1918–1920 Influenza Pandemic," which won the Western Association of Women Historians' 2020 Judith Lee Ridge best article prize.<sup>22</sup> The essay detailed a little-known episode in California history, which, of course, is important. More significant, though, was that North wrote it in March 2020, just as the deadly COVID-19 pandemic was sweeping the globe. Looking back to COVID's predecessor, North carefully laid out, step by step, everything that

officials in California and the United States learned—and immediately forgot—about how to slow the spread of that often fatal infection. North specified what Americans did then to protect themselves from death by influenza, advice that sounds eerily familiar: go home and stay there; practice social distancing and good hand hygiene; and wear a mask over the mouth and nose to control the shedding of infectious droplets. In August 2020, when *California History* published North’s essay, and several months before the first COVID vaccines made it into American arms, this was news that everyone could use.

## NOTES

1. For a history of both the journal and California as a distinct field of historical inquiry, see Josh Sides, “The Normal Excellence of Long Accomplishment: A Brief History of California History,” *California History* 91, no. 1 (February 2014): 2–9.
2. Richard K. Beardsley and Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, “Ethnic Solidarity Turned to New Activism in a California Enclave: The Japanese Americans of ‘Delta,’” *California History* 68, no. 3 (October 1989): 100–115.
3. Dorothy Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
4. See, e.g., Luis Valdez, “Literary California”; James D. Houston, “From El Dorado to the Pacific Rim: The Place Called California”; Gerald Haslam, “Literary California: The Ultimate Frontier of the Western World”; David Fine, “Nathanael West, Raymond Chandler, and the Los Angeles Novel”; Margaret Bedrosian, “William Saroyan in California”; George Henderson, “John Steinbeck’s Spatial Imagination in *The Grapes of Wrath*: A Critical Essay”; Ronald J. Schmidt, “Uniformity or Diversity? Recent Language Policy in California Public Education”; Nancey Green Leigh, “What Happened to the American Dream? Changing Earning Opportunities and Prospects of Middle-Class Californians, 1967–1987”; and Maxine Hong Kingston and Earll Kingston, “Mah-Jongg: A Radio Play Based on the Novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*,” all in *California History* 68, no. 4 (December 1989).
5. *California History* 69, no. 2 (July 1990).
6. Lowell J. Bean, “Indians of California: Diverse and Complex Peoples,” *California History* 71, no. 3 (October 1992): 302–323.
7. *California History* 71, no. 3 (October 1992).
8. Albert L. Hurtado, “Sexuality in California’s Franciscan Missions: Cultural Perceptions and Sad Realities,” *California History* 91, no. 3 (October 1992): 370–385.
9. Albert L. Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).
10. William P. McGowan, “Fault-Lines: Seismic Safety and the Changing Political Economy of California’s Transportation System,” *California History* 72, no. 2 (July 1993): 170–193.
11. *California History* 72, no. 1 (April 1993).
12. *California History* 73, no. 1 (April 1994).
13. Richard Lowitt, “The Hetch Hetchy Controversy, Phase II: The 1913 Senate Debate,” *California History* 74, no. 2 (July 1995): 190–203.
14. *California History* 74, no. 3 (October 1995).
15. Donald J. Pisani, “‘I Am Resolved Not to Interfere, but Permit All to Work Freely’: The Gold Rush and American Resource Law,” *California History* 77, no. 4 (December 1998): 123–148.
16. Sucheng Chan, “A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush,” *California History* 79, no. 2 (July 2000): 44–85.
17. Donna C. Schuele, “None Could Deny the Eloquence of This Lady: Women, Law, and Government in California, 1850–1890,” *California History* 81, nos. 3–4 (January 2003): 169–198.
18. Michelle Nickerson, “Politically Desperate Housewives: Women and Conservatism in Postwar Los Angeles,” *California History* 86, no. 3 (January 2009); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
19. *California History* 89, no. 4 (January 2012).
20. Michael F. Magliari, “Masters, Apprentices, and Kidnappers: Indian Servitude and Slave Trafficking in Humboldt County, California, 1860–1863,” *California History* 97, no. 2 (May 2020): 2–26.
21. “In Whose Memory?,” *California History* 97, no. 1 (February 2020).
22. Diane M. T. North, “California and the 1918–1920 Influenza Pandemic,” *California History* 97, no. 3 (October 2020): 3–36; UCPress.edu, “Pandemic History Article Published in California History Wins WAWH Prize,” May 7, 2021, <https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/56072/pandemic-history-article-published-in-california-history-wins-wawh-prize/>.