

Lead Type and Printer's Devils: Newspapers in Nineteenth-Century California

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This paper investigates the use of local newspapers as a source of data to complement archaeological and ethnological sources, as well as other historical records. Often overlooked as a source of anthropological data, newspapers give the modern researcher insight into everyday activities and to the social and political climate of their communities. At least in the California mining communities the newspapers did not ignore the marginal groups. The coverage was frequently offensive, nineteenth-century editors were never accused of being discrete, and one source suggests that, "...on the western frontier an age of journalistic invective and vitriol followed the Civil War, and there were plenty of feisty scribes who took full advantage of it." (Karolevitz 1985:81) Newspapers do provide names, dates and other data which can be helpful in confirming other sources and in some cases provide the only source of data prior to excavation.

My work in the Oroville area focuses on the ethnic interaction that took place during the last half of the nineteenth century. In particular, the interaction between the Anglo, Chinese, and Native American populations. The Oroville newspapers were owned and edited by the Anglo population and represent this viewpoint. However, Chinese, Jewish, and African-American newspapers were being published in San Francisco during this period. At this stage of the research I have not looked at these sources nor at the archaeology of the Oroville area, although this is certainly part of my overall research plan.

The Setting

On January 24, 1848 gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in what is now Coloma, California. Over the next few years people from all over the world swarmed into the gold fields, completely inundating the northern half of the State and changing forever the existing cultures. The majority of the newcomers were from the Eastern United States and they brought with them a tradition of local newspapers. This paper addresses the role of newspapers in the gold mining communities and their use as tools in historical archaeology.

The community of Oroville, California lies on the East bank of the Feather River, Northeast of Sacramento. Founded as Ophir in 1849, Oroville has served since 1856 as the county seat of Butte County and the center of social and political happenings in the county. At least one newspaper, and for many periods more than one, has served the community. *The Butte Record* (later renamed *The Weekly Record*) moved to Oroville from Bidwell Bar in 1856 after Oroville won the hotly contested county seat election. *The Butte Record* was founded in the town of Bidwell Bar on November 12, 1853 proclaiming itself a Democratic paper, politics being an important distinction among nineteenth-century newspapers.

In his "The Press of Butte County" George H. Crosette, second publisher of *The Butte Record*, lists the papers that formed, published and died in the early years of Butte County (Wells 1882:195-7). Between 1850 and 1880 five papers were started in Oroville, although only two survive until this day. In 1880, with a population of 18,721 (McGie 1982:141) there were eight newspapers serving Butte County. This is not an unusual situation in nineteenth-century California, where the population wanted their news.

In October of 1873 *The Weekly Mercury* began publishing in Oroville. *The Record* had moved to Chico, although it continued to promote its status as the oldest newspaper in the county. This was the result of a common occurrence in western states, the battle over the location of the county seat. By this time Chico had become the larger and more economically dominant town in Butte county, but it had not convinced the rest of the county to vote for its designation as county seat. Numerous other papers were published in the county for short periods of time, however most of these were lost due to the periodic fires which swept through the wooden California towns of the nineteenth century. Current researchers owe a debt of gratitude to the many individuals who saved copies of the local weeklies, particularly Herbert Howe Bancroft who subscribed to numerous papers statewide and who purchased back issues to complete his collection to support his sponsored writing of the *History of California*. Bancroft's biographer, John Caughey, claims Bancroft felt that newspapers provided "the only record for the initial happenings of a given locality, and even when supplemented by formal histories and volumes of reminiscence they continued to provide a more consecutive record than any other source (Caughey 1946:80)."

Role of the Local Newspaper

The local newspaper of nineteenth-century California performed much the same role as it does today, only at a much more important level. There was no TV or radio to compete for the public's attention. Other than word of mouth the newspaper was the only means of conveying the news to the local community.

Besides serving the local area the small newspapers functioned in much the same way that wire services and TV news networks do in today's world. Through a program called "exchanges" the small newspapers mailed copies to each other thereby setting up a news network throughout California and for many portions of the West. Papers freely quoted each other and editors vied for the honor of being quoted in the most papers. Besides being quoted in the small papers, the local press served as correspondents for the major city dailies. Thus, even the smallest incident might receive widespread circulation in the state. This fact must not be overlooked by the researcher who may well find material relating to their geographical area in the pages of the other local papers or in the city dailies. A particularly good example of this can be found in the October 25, 1856 edition of *The Butte Record*, which reported that the *Shasta Courier* had written about a white deer skin dance at the mouth of the Trinity River at which over 1000 Indians had participated and that 5 white deer skins had been used, 3 of which were owned by the same individual. In Northern California the *Sacramento Union*, the *Alta California* of San Francisco, and *The Bulletin* of San Francisco are among the most useful of the large city dailies in their coverage of the outlying areas.

Another factor to be aware of when using local newspapers for research is the common practice of using “patent sheets.” Local newspapers, particularly the weeklies, were generally 4 pages in length. These were printed as two pages, pages 1 & 4 and pages 2 & 3 being printed at the same time and then folded. The “patent sheet” was produced by the large city printers with non-local news, poetry, fiction, and advertising on pages 1 & 4, along with the local paper’s Banner and dateline. The local paper had only to set and print pages 2 & 3 at a considerable labor saving to themselves. This practice was looked down upon by the “true” newspeople, but without the “patent sheet” many small towns would have done without local news. Since the papers did not publicize the fact that they were using a “patent sheet” the researcher must be alert to the lack of local news and advertising on the front and back pages. The main concern being the separation of local opinion and style from that generated outside the community.

The prestige of the editors within the community varied depending on their politics. In the nineteenth century, at least in the West, editors’ politics were worn on their sleeves. While an occasional editor, i.e. L. D. Clark who founded *The Weekly Mercury* in Oroville, tried to proclaim their editorial neutrality, it was all but impossible to ignore the active political parties vying for control of California. This was particularly true from 1850 to 1865 during the slave/free state debate and the subsequent Civil War.

Needless to say, newspaper research in a particular geographic area requires not only knowledge of that area, but of the national and in many cases world events that are impacting the study area. In nineteenth-century California this need becomes particularly evident. During the gold rush, 1848–1855, people came to California from all over the world, most arriving during the last six years of this period. While the immediate cause of their immigration was the discovery of gold, the social and political climates that allowed them to depart from their homes tend to be very different for the various groups.

While the world context is important, the major contribution of the local newspaper to the researcher’s knowledge of the area comes in the local reaction to events in the rest of the State and in the nation. The period of 1848–1865 in the United States was particularly turbulent. California played a major role in the national politics and its entry as a state in 1850, only two years after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was embroiled in the national politics of slave versus free states.

Typical News Accounts

On July 16, 1880 *The Weekly Mercury* published the following account of an Indian dance done at Berry Creek, still an active rancheria in Butte County.

INDIAN FANDANGO

Sunday morning, in company with Mr. Cress and Billy Martin, we visited the ‘Digger Burning Ground’ and witnessed the game dances of that tribe. Two chiefs—Captain Billy and Kanaka Pete—thirty bucks, and about fifty squaws and papooses were in attendance. Big Jim, the champion hunter of the tribe, acted as grand mogul of the festivities. Among the characters

represented were deer, hare, geese, cranes, buzzards, mice and grasshoppers. Each character entered the wigwam alone and was obliged to dance a set of four tunes, the music being made by singing, jumpin up and down on a long box, rattles and clapping hands. The orchestra numbered twenty. Their music was weird, yet such excellent time was kept that the commingling of sounds produced a harmony as pleasant to the ear as it was strange. It is impossible to describe the costumes worn. Feathers, furs, beads, paint and fringed skirts made from the inner bark of trees, were the principle articles used by the various characters in disguising themselves. The dance was similar in character to a plantation walkaround and the exercise was so vigorous that the perspiration would gather in puddles around the feet of the manager while he would be waiting for a new candidate. The aborigines also had a feast consisting of acorn soup, roast beef, wine and unsalted bread. In eating the soup, large vessels of which were numerous scattered around the scene, the Digger would scoop up a handful and convey it to his mouth. This was the first time in five years that the festal occasion had been observed, and Captain Billy informed us that 'may be no more have um dance; Injuns he nearly all dead.'...After witnessing the 'sun dance,' in which two small Digger boys are represented to be lost and looking for the sun in order to find their way home, we left...

In example with more archaeological implications can be seen in the following story from *The Mercury* which appeared on September 9, 1881. The headlines read: "The Chinese Quarters Entirely Destroyed by Fire—About Seventy-five Buildings Burned." The story goes on to explain how the fire started about 7:30 P.M. in the Chinese restaurant on the north side of Main St. between Lincoln and Pine streets and with the high winds burned all but a few buildings in Chinatown. Oroville at this point in its history had the second largest Chinese population in the United States, second only to San Francisco. On September 16, just a week later, the paper reported that, "Chinatown, which was almost totally destroyed by fire last Thursday evening, is being rapidly rebuilt."

Uses of Newspapers

In the foregoing stories there are several points of interest to the researcher. First and foremost is the presence of various ethnic groups. While minority groups may have been invisible to historians, they were not invisible in the everyday life of Oroville, or for that matter the everyday life of any nineteenth-century community. Archaeologist's have prided themselves in their ability to discover the common people in the material culture record. The use of newspapers enhances this type of research by adding another piece of evidence.

While the article on the Indian dance that the editor observed could be construed as derogatory, there are several pieces of valuable data. As a part of a larger travel article the location of the dance ground at Berry Creek is established in a general way. The names of the leaders are printed. The fact that about 80 Indians were in attendance gives the researcher some idea of the number of individuals who, while not necessarily residing at Berry Creek, participated in the call for a dance. The dances, food, instruments, and costume materials

listed correspond to those later written about by Roland Dixon during his fieldwork among the Maidu in Butte and Plumas counties in the years 1899–1903. I find it particularly interesting, and indicative of the editor’s eye for detail, that the number of repetitions of the dances are recorded.

The second article provides a number of points useful to archaeological research. Again the date of the fire is absolute. The starting point in the Chinese restaurant and the location of this restaurant on the north side of Main Street provide spatial details that could help locate likely sites. The article goes on to mention the buildings that burned, providing a list of business types located in Chinatown, not all of which, however were owned or operated by Chinese.

In the first three years of its existence, from Nov. 1853 to Nov. 1856, *The Weekly Record* published over 100 articles pertaining to minority ethnic groups. Most of these articles dealt with Chinese and Native American news, but other groups included Hawaiian, Jewish, African–American, and Mexican. What do these have to do with archaeology? First, in many cases they provide names. Second, they provide employment locations, seemingly what a person did was as important to nineteenth–century Americans as it is today. Third, in many cases they give residential information. Not street addresses, since they didn’t exist, but, house or building names which can be checked against local building records. A specific location reference can be found in the *Weekly Record* of May 13, 1854 in a letter from Hamilton City. The letter discusses the location of several abandoned Indian villages. Another item relating to building usage comes from the May 28, 1870 copy of the *Weekly Record*, which reports the dedication of the St. Nicholas Hotel as a synagogue.

Conclusion

Newspapers are an important source of data for the historical researcher. Using Deetz’ definition of material culture, “...that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior” (Deetz 1977:24), newspapers certainly qualify for attention from the archaeological community. Their biases show, particularly in the nineteenth century, but, the data they provide tends to be accurate and checkable. They are not to be used as a sole source, but then neither should most data sources. It is only in the mustering of several lines of evidence that conclusions can be reached. Newspapers provide accurate dates for local happenings. They provide names, sometimes with interesting spellings. They provide spatial information through their coverage of fires, new construction, and other events. Perhaps their most important usage, however, derives from the researcher’s admittance into the day to day life of the community, providing snapshots of the hopes, fears, joys, and tragedies of nineteenth–century California.

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